

# DENA



ELLA WATERBURY GARDNER





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DENA













“Look, Leta,” and Ardena lifted the bunch, “don’t you think they’re just the color of her eyes?”

*Page 48.*



# DENA

BY  
ELLA WATERBURY GARDNER

ILLUSTRATED BY  
ELSIE DRAKE



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TO  
MY MOTHER







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## CHAPTER I

IOWA ARDENA MARSH

Ardena leaned against the footboard of the old walnut bed and watched the stolid little woman adjusting her shawl before the tilted looking glass.

"You're getting it on crooked, grandmother." Ardena straightened the shawl on the square shoulders that the fringed point of the shawl might fall in a straight line down the middle of the black alpaca skirt.

"Am I? Well, I don't know but that's 'bout the way I've been doing most things lately. Seems like since the funeral I can't get back into the old way." Grandmother's jerky tones sank, the last word ending in a sigh. Under the mass of red hair, Ardena's face flushed and her mouth quivered, but she hastily lifted the black velvet bonnet and put it in the knotted hands outstretched to take it.



“Oh, you’re getting that on all crooked, too!” Ardena caught her breath and a light came into her dark eyes as the stiff little plume slanted ignominiously to the left over a tight knot of gray hair.

After a more decided tilt of the paintless looking glass grandmother replaced the bonnet and tied it securely by the bow under the chin.

“I don’t see why your father has to hang his glass so high. He’s not so tall he needs to string it up to the ceiling. And a window shade rolled to the very top — and crooked at that!” Grandmother gave a little sniff of disgust and stretched for the offending shade, cutting off, as she lowered the frayed and punctured green curtain, a share of the mellow brightness of the September sunshine.

“And then that bed,” grandmother continued to note as she turned about. “I’ve been working to get that smooth the whole week I’ve been here. But it’s the springs — I’m certain of that, finally. As long’s your mother’s gone now, Ardena, I don’t know what you will come to!” Grandmother’s voice softened and she tugged for the handkerchief at her belt. “Your father’ll never get ahead enough to buy new and he’ll never leave off reading long enough to mend the old. The printing business in a small town’s not a very paying business



even when it's got a hustling manager. And William's anything but a hustler. He doesn't even charge enough for the work he does do. Went and did a real good job with the Anderson girl's wedding announcements and then charged so little that stingy old Billy Anderson sent him a check for twice what he'd asked for." Grandmother sniffed again in impatient disgust. Then, as she noted Ardena's very long and very sober face, "But he means well, William does. And he thinks a lot of you children."

"I'm going to learn to do the managing," responded Ardena. "I can help father."

"You're no more'n a child yet, Ardena. And going to school and keeping house and tending to the children —," she was looking again at Ardena. "It doesn't seem right your mother was taken. She was needed so and she —" Her mouth twitched uncontrollably.

Ardena, leaning against the foot of the old walnut bedstead, straightened to the full height of her fourteen years. But erect and tall Ardena was still girlish, for the shiny brown skirt, even with its various saggings, did not reach the shoetops and the mass of red hair had ascended only to the neck. "But, grandmother, I can — yes, I can." It was



the seriousness of the dark eyes behind the fringe of fluffy hair that was persuasive.

Grandmother, with jerky little steps, walked on towards the sitting room. "We might as well sit down," she said, as she seated herself in the clumsy wooden rocker. "Your Uncle Logan may be an hour yet in coming. Saturday's a bad time to get trading done. But I'll be putting my gloves on anyway. It's hard to get the horses to stand and he'll want to be home seeing to the chores." Extending her arms beyond the confines of the well-pinned shawl she unrolled the black cotton gloves wadded in a knot and Ardena, seated on the bumpy carpet lounge, watched her nervously pull them over her work-knotted hands.

"I don't know, Ardena," grandmother was losing button after button in the nervous grasp of her blunt fingers, "as I ought to go off and leave you. A week hasn't been as much as I thought it would be. I didn't help you to get done what I wanted to. The house is pretty well cleaned and the washing and ironing's done for next week, but I haven't showed you how to do everything you ought to know. Somehow I can't seem to think as well as I could before your mother was taken sick — she — she had such good common sense on everything. I don't



know how you will manage," she said thoughtfully, as she looked across the red wool stand-cover at Ardena, who sat in a hollow of the old lounge, her hands clasped about her knee, her face sobered in sympathy.

But Ardena, pensive, brightened. "Why, grandmother, you know I had to help mother so much — it's a year in November! Really, I almost managed things myself sometimes — when she was the worst. And father is good — he always tries to help — and Alonzo is large enough to do lots of things."

"Then there's the mortgage on my farm," grandmother continued, unheeding. "I've worked my fingers to the bone to save that farm and now I don't want to give in at the very last. Logan's a good son-in-law and a first-rate manager but I feel safest to tend to things myself. Your grandfather run things when he was alive and he 'bout run them into the ground, too, and I said once I got the reins in my own hands I'd never give them over to another man. And then there's my butter and eggs customers — I feel like I can't give them up. Poor Lib, too! She's got her hands full with the four children — and the baby's so cross. She's not got any too good health, either."



Grandmother's faded blue eyes filled with tears which spilled one by one down the furrows of her wrinkled brown cheeks. Ardena's own eyes, in the shadow of the fringe of red hair, glowed luminously and her hands, clasped in the folds of her dingy skirt, locked themselves tightly together. But for a moment only. "Father thinks it best we manage by ourselves, too," she said quietly, a strained note of reassurance in her voice. "Don't worry about us, grandmother. We'll make it all right. I'm sure we will."

"And William T.'s only a baby." Grandmother's solicitation kept urging her on. "Five years old's a pretty young age to be left without a mother. Iowa was a good mother to her children. You won't ever get over her loss, Ardena. She was a good housekeeper and a good manager. And we all know she's had little enough to manage with. . . . She wasn't any hand to complain either, but she did what she had to do and she did it cheerfully. And she was a pretty girl. . . ."

Out in the kitchen a clock was ticking its loud, intrusive, shallow tick-tack. Horses' hoofs sounded, a light buggy spun humming along the road before the open door and from across the street came the shouts of the children,



“ Pump, pump, pull away;  
Come or I’ll pull you away,”

followed by ringing squeals.

Grandmother nervously wadded a crumpled handkerchief in the tight grip of the black cotton gloves. “ If only Alonzo wasn’t just at the age to wear out pants! He no need to squirm and wiggle around so much and then they wouldn’t give out so soon. Alonzo never was a hand to sit still. Cold weather’s coming on and he’ll begin to wear shoes and stockings and that’ll mean the darning to keep going. And you’ll be taken up with your studies — this being your first year in the high school. But you want to learn to keep the mending up as you go along or you’ll see the things’ll be wearing out soon. And even if your father does seem to keep working right along he’s always found it hard to buy new even when Iowa was . . . ”

Ardena started to her feet, the rusty springs of the bumpy old lounge creaking as she rose. “ I’m forgetting something. I must make good use of you while you are here,” she said, as she hurried up the steep flight of stairs leading out of the sitting room. “ I’ve saved this little book to write down some recipes in,” she went on, as she came down, again



seated herself on the lounge, and opened a little red notebook. "I'm going to begin in a very sensible manner. Most of the girls are foolish over salads and cakes, but I'm going to begin with the staff of life," commencing to write. "Now, tell me all over again how to do it so that I'll be sure to have the directions exact," and Ardena attentively chewed the remnant of the eraser. "I've made bread before — but then — Well, just how is it, grandmother? I know that I'll forget the salt or the yeast or the flour or something. Recipes are harder to remember than dates in history. But 'where there's a will there's a way' — and I will." Ardena smiled bravely across at her grandmother.

"Yes," grandmother answered, a bit dubiously. "If only you'll remember, Ardena. You mean well, but you're real harum-scarum most of the time and there isn't setting much dependence on you. But you're getting older and since —"

"'Yeast,' you said, didn't you?" Ardena's voice was a bit unsteady, and her head was lowered over the page. "If I should forget the yeast Alonzo says he'll blow some air into the dough with that bicycle pump he found. No, really, grandmother dear, don't look quite so disgusted, please. I'm sure I'll remember to put in the yeast."



It was not until the sun was slanting through the west window that a quick pounding of heavy hoofs whirled the old surrey to a halt before the house.

"There's Logan now," grandmother exclaimed, hastily rising. "I wrapped Alonzo's pants I'm going to patch and the little suit of William T.'s that was started and never finished in the same bundle, didn't I? I'll try to get them ready for Logan to bring back next Saturday. But it's not much time I get for sewing with so much to do. And then the other bundle, too, Ardena,—your mother's things. They'll be yours later, only I want them while I live. Tell Logan I'm coming."

Alonzo had already stationed himself near the stamping grays, his brown freckled face squinting in the sunlight and his hair in damp strings about his bare head. From a small whirl of dust was emerging William T., stout of frame and plump of cheek, as he made his way frantically across the street.

"Don't forget to keep an eye on William T.," grandmother was saying to Ardena as they came down the walk from the house. "Put the matches up on the clock shelf and stick the hatchet up under the roof of the shed each time. Hang the kerosene can up on a nail and don't let William T. go down



the cellar steps alone. And then I most believe that bed won't look quite so bumpy if you turn the mattress 'round the way it was in the first place. And when a hole comes in the rag carpet, darn it right off, Ardena, before it sets in to ravel. Oatmeal in the bulk's cheaper than in the package and beef's not as high as pork now. Wash your dishes after each meal and then they won't pile up so. Don't leave them till you come from school — it takes the shine off the knives and forks. And don't forget to sweep under the beds and behind the stove and iron your starched things before you do your plain clothes."

"Yes, grandmother, I promise faithfully to do my very, very best. I'm going to be as much like mother as I can," Ardena answered, and threw her arms impulsively about her grandmother's neck and pressed her fresh warm lips against the withered cheek. "You've been so good to us. We — we —" But grandmother had bent down to kiss Alonzo. And then she bent lower and kissed William T.

Uncle Logan, big and homely and good, stepped to the ground to help grandmother into the front seat beside him. Then he patted Ardena on the shoulder, dropped a sack of candy into William T.'s grimy little hands and climbed over the wheel. A wave to Ardena, a forward lunge of the horses, a



whir of wheels, and they were gone. Alonzo and William T. were dividing impartially the pink and the white gumdrops, with the empty sack to compensate for the uneven number. But Ardena still gazed down the road at the fast dispersing cloud of dust, her eyes luminous again behind the blowing fringe of red hair. Then William T. was slipping a sticky gumdrop into her hand with a "Here, Dena," and Alonzo was insisting that she take a generous helping from his handful. Ardena blinked again. And then she smiled.



## CHAPTER II

### OF FOOTBALL FAME

The Marsh family quickly settled down to the new order of things. Ardena truly tried to live up to the good promises she had made her grandmother, but there were many and frequent lapses. The meals to get, the dishes to wash, the beds to make, the washing, the ironing, the scrubbing — it was a physical impossibility to do it all as she knew that her grandmother wished it done and she realized that her grandmother was often all but completely discouraged. Ardena, it must be said, sometimes just willfully drifted and the Marsh housekeeping consisted of the proverbial lick and promise. But at fourteen one is much more vitally concerned with high school football games than with housekeeping. It was the good little grandmother who kept the ship floating, for she did the sewing for the family and came in frequently for a day or two of general cleaning up. Mr. Marsh cut short the reading of his paper on Saturday morning and turned the wash-



ing machine and at frequent intervals curtailed the perusal of an absorbing book or article to lend a hand at housework. Alonzo did the chores and assisted with the detested dishes. In answering to William T.'s many and varied needs each immediate and distant member of the Marsh family was subject to call.

Ardena was keenly alive to all that pertained to the first-year class of the Arcadia high school. She loved her books, getting her lessons with a flash that was bewildering to her slow-minded, though lovable, little school comrade, Leta Lindsey. At the present season of the year Ardena was a devoted football fan — that is, as devoted a fan as it was possible to become with the serious handicap of the usually unavailable price of admittance to the athletic field.

In the Arcadia high school that fall, the football season had progressed to the third game. The first two games were little spoken of in Arcadia school circles; the scores were soon forgotten. But the third game merited attention — the Arcadia football team had won.

Ardena had been present at this game. And now she was the last of the last ecstatic group of girls to leave the field. It had been a perfect autumn day, the team had won, and she had been there, the req-



uisite twenty-five cents for once being in possession at the decisive moment.

"Isn't it just glorious, Ardena?" Leta was saying.

"It makes me feel all thrilly and proud!" Ardena exclaimed in an outburst of emotion.

"And isn't Carlton Bell a fine player? And isn't Adelbert Hastings?" Leta's admiration for the battle-torn heroes some two blocks on ahead was unstinted.

"And we're going to have a celebration," Ardena repeated, as they crossed the street. "Oh, I just think we ought to do something real big and wonderful—" But some other girl in the crowd had had a bigger, newer thought.

At the next street corner Ardena parted from the group and hurried on by herself. With her hair blowing about her face and her faded blue cloak flapping in the wind she pressed her dingy cap more firmly down on her head and finally broke into a run. Some blocks away from the main street she turned breathless up the walk leading to an old, dimmed, weather-beaten house that slanted its two stories, straight and plain, from the street. William T., apparently the only one at home, was visible through a cloud of dust in the middle of the street,



for at the age of five William T. had caught the spirit of the season and against Budge Cracker of across the street was vigorously defending his rights to a wadded sofa pillow.

Hurrying up the loose front steps Ardena pushed aside the dust-laden mat, found the key and fitted it in the lock just as a rolling of carriage wheels and a pounding of heavy hoofs drew her attention again to the street. It was Uncle Logan and Aunt Lib and the four children. Ardena, leaving the key in the lock, hastened down the plank sidewalk out to the old surrey halted at the hitching post. Aunt Lib had been to the dentist's. Then the purchasing of shoes for the family of four had consumed the rest of the afternoon, and they had stopped for supper before starting on their six-mile drive home. Uncle Logan hitched the team. Ardena helped Annie and Bessie and Charlie to alight, while gentle Aunt Lib with a swollen cheek and hat askew, carried a cross baby to the house.

A half dozen extra meant more elaborate preparations for supper. Ardena whisked on a ragged kitchen apron which lay draped over the back of the wooden rocking chair and catching up a rusty tin pan from the cupboard plunged down into the damp, musty cellar for potatoes. But the potatoes being a



mere scattering over the bottom of the barrel, Ardena was forced to think out a more varied menu. The supply of eggs was also inadequate, there being but two rolling in the depths of the peach basket. Ardena, while busy peeling the potatoes, was truly perplexed. And meanwhile the fretful wail of the baby came from the sitting room and the three children in visiting idleness squeaked their new shoes unweariedly over the resounding boards of the kitchen floor. Uncle Logan came in finally. Uncle Logan, big and homely and good, discerned the situation at a glance and dispatched the children to the yard while he himself went back up town for a supply of provisions.

At six o'clock William T. and the three small cousins sought the shelter of the house, the evening dampness threatening the luster of the new shoes. Alonzo, one of the spectators of the football game from a neighboring tree, had at length straggled in and adding himself to the group in the sitting room had started a game of tag. Back and forth on the carpet lounge, around the stove and over the chairs they jumped and "tagged" while Ardena poked the kitchen fire to urge the kettle of potatoes to a boil. At this juncture Mr. Marsh appeared.

"Good evening — good evening. Glad to see



you," Mr. Marsh, spare and nervous, enthusiastically greeted Uncle Logan, who was cutting thick slices of bread. "I didn't know you were in town to-day. Why didn't you drop into the office to see me? Glad you stopped for supper — it will kind of even things up. Ardena, how are you getting along? Things most ready? Oh, going to have steak, are you?" Mr. Marsh made haste to hang his frayed overcoat on the nail by the door, a folded newspaper protruding from the torn pocket. "Well, I'll cook that. A woman can't cook steak. Now, get your skillet good and hot — can't cook steak without a fire. Here, Alonzo," he called, as Alonzo darted out to the kitchen in a wiggling endeavor to escape catching, "run out to the wood pile for some chips — quick now."

"Father," Ardena remonstrated, the heat of the stove making her face glow as brightly as the hair that crowned it, "do let me alone this once. If no one bothers me, I'll have this supper ready in fifteen minutes. You'll have enough time to sit down and look over your paper." Ardena thought to divert his attention.

But in the matter of cooking steak Mr. Marsh was obdurate. He filled the stove with chips, crammed down stove lids, and poked ashes from the coals at



the hearth. Thin puffs of blue smoke curled from the cracks and openings and finally the smouldering embers crackled into life and the fire roared up the chimney. Reaching for the piece of steak Mr. Marsh slapped it in the pan, the grease spattering up and burning him. In the next room the baby screamed and stiffened in a fresh burst of cries and the game of tag resulted in knocking over a chair.

"Good gracious, Ardena!" Mr. Marsh burst out. "I always told you a woman couldn't cook steak. I ought to have started this fire from the very beginning. It is a shame if you can't get up a good plain meal with less fuss and trouble than you seem to be having with this one. You've seen Aunt Lib give us a regular feast without ten minutes' warning. I've spoken to you several times about looking out for the future and planning ahead and having things on hand. A woman that isn't forehanded and foreheaded —" but the constant sizzling of the meat drowned the completion of the sentence.

Then Uncle Logan saved the situation a second time. He departed for the sitting room and Aunt Lib for the kitchen. Cutting short the game of tag he settled each energetic participant on a separate seat and then commenced a gentle, patient, determined pacing up and down the room with the baby.



Meanwhile Aunt Lib, a practised hand, was turning out a juicy piece of meat, stirring a panful of rich brown gravy, beating up a kettle of fluffy potatoes and in every way producing the delectable and tempting. Ardena helped at every needed point and silently felt her admiration for the white-faced, slender woman with the swollen cheek and steady brown eyes grow stronger than ever. Aunt Lib personified the willingness of Ardena's spirit, the goal of her housewifely intentions.

It was dark when the family were finally bundled into the carriage and started on the home journey. Then Mr. Marsh fitted the one remaining button of his frayed overcoat in the buttonhole, put on his rusty hat and went back to the office. It had been previously agreed that Alonzo was to take care of William T. that evening and Ardena realized the first free moment in hours. She closed the kitchen door upon the mountain-like pile of dishes stacked on the kitchen table and from behind the lounge in the sitting room dragged out her cloak, the faded blue one, buttonless and short of sleeves.

"Now, Alonzo, don't go away while I'm gone. And keep William T. in the house. Can't you and William T. wash the dishes we'll need for breakfast? And put William T. to bed before long,"



she directed as she re-tied the green tie at her throat.

Alonzo, however, sat gloomily silent on the edge of the old carpet lounge, the springs of which bulged up around him at varying peaks and angles.

"I didn't promise I'd stay home this very night," he answered, his hands burrowed in his pockets.

"But the next night was your turn and this is the next night. I've stayed home the last three times, so I've played fair. And, Lonzy, I do want to see the celebration. It was such a glorious game! You can go when you're in the high school." Then as she pinned on the tasselled tam o' shanter she coaxed, "Why don't you finish the 'Revolutionary Heroes'? Or you can take the clock to pieces if you'll stay. It won't run the way it is, so you can't hurt it much." But Alonzo, non-committal, continued to sit on the bumpy lounge, his dark hair tossed about, his blue eyes unrelenting and his hands still burrowed in his pockets, while in the corner of the room on the floor William T. industriously emptied a battered bookcase of its lower row of encyclopedias. So Ardena opened the door and hurried out into the cool darkness.

Adelbert Hastings had donated the dry goods boxes from the back of his father's store for the celebration and the boys had piled them up at the corner



of the courthouse square. After a short but spirited parade in honor of the victory the huge pile of boxes was lighted and the smoke and flames rose soaring and crackling straight up into the blue stillness of the November night. Then the ring of dancing, yelling, singing and cheering boys and girls circled around it. When from the tower of the courthouse above them nine clear claps cut the night air the flames had sunk to jets of fire that darted out and back and died down lower. At length one flame, catching at a little pile of unburned straw, spread a circle of light around the square and revealed Alonzo, unwarily foremost of the group of small boys at the outskirts of the crowd. Then Ardena, Cinderella-like, fled. The everyday world with its responsibilities was held off no longer. The littered kitchen, the neglected William T., the faithless Alonzo darted through her mind and crowded out the bonfire, the parade, the noise, the fun. And Ardena sped homeward, down dark hollow streets, past dark closed houses and into the black shade of low-bending trees.

When still some distance away she knew that her fears were not groundless, for wail upon wail, deep and long and woeful, came to her ready ear. Faster than ever Ardena cut across the corner and ran



down the next block. At the corner she all but collided with a little bunch of misery hidden in the shadow of the trees.

"Oh!" she breathed, grasping for the coatless, the hatless, the forlorn William T. "Oh, I'm so glad you aren't dead! Here's Dena. Don't cry so, honey, we'll go home." She took his cold, damp little hand in hers and tried to urge him along the board sidewalk, in and out of the dark shadows.

But William T. was inconsolable and continued to dig a fat little fist into a tear-dripping eye. Up the plank walk to the porch and up the sunken steps Ardena drew him. When she opened the door a kerosene lamp, burning dimly on the littered center-table, was emitting a smoky, stifling odor. The fire had gone out, books and papers lay scattered about on the rag carpet and the meager furniture of the room stood crowded in the corner. And the child continued in his grief. Ardena, meanwhile, was groping about the dark kitchen for a lamp with more oil in it. Having found one, finally, and lighted it and blown out the other she began to lift the half-burnt sticks of wood from the cold stove. But William T., his anguish becoming more intense, swelled himself afresh and continued to pour forth his feelings of cold and hunger and drowsiness and neglect



in a fresh series of wails. Ardena could really make pretenses of deafness no longer — nor turn from the inevitable. He must be distracted some way. Looking around for something — anything, her eye fell first upon a worn limp purse on the clock shelf. This she tossed at William T. and then went on whittling shavings for the stove.

William T., whether tired out or cried out or charmed with the novelty of the gift, became pacified. Rolling on the floor, he opened the purse in the air, the pennies falling on his upturned face. Ardena laid the fire and turned for a match. But with a startled jump she grabbed the coughing, choking William T. by the heels and staggering to her feet shook him in mid-air with all her strength until the penny popped out of his mouth. Then letting him slide to the floor she sank into the old wooden rocking chair while William T., scared and blinking, silently adjusted himself to a more natural poise.

“For the land sake, Ardena Marsh, what on earth is the matter over here!” Mrs. Shute, small and bony, entered at the half-open door, a red flannel shawl encircling her narrow, alert face. “I never heard such yelling in all my days — or nights either! Who’s getting killed? Ebenezer’s been off to bed



since nine, but I declare to goodness I couldn't go till I found out about this racket over here. So I finally says to myself, as I was warming my feet in the kitchen oven, 'Well, I'll put on my shoes and I'll go over and I'll see for myself what those children are up to.' "

"It's only William T.," Ardena answered meekly.

"Well, it's enough," Mrs. Shute admitted as she came into the room. "I've heard him hollering for the last hour. Where've you been?"

"I've been down to the football celebration. I thought Alonzo was going to stay with William T., but I guess he didn't."

"That's just like a boy. I should think you'd know better than to set any dependence on a boy. Seems to me with your responsibilities your place is at home 'tending to things instead of gallervanting 'round to such foolish doings as football celebrations! What makes William T. so quiet now?" Mrs. Shute turned her face with its sharp little lines that melted into softness at the slightest provocation upon William T., a miserable little heap on the floor. "Seems to me he looks rather white."

"He — he just swallowed a penny," Ardena confessed. "But it came up."

"For goodness' sake, Ardena, he didn't swallow



a penny! I was reading in the paper the other night about death resulting from swallowed coppers. Blood poison set in and he went right off. That child doesn't look exactly natural to me. Come here, William T."

"No, no, Mrs. Shute, he's all right, he's all right. William T., aren't you, aren't you?" Ardena, determined that it should not be otherwise, grabbed the impassive William T., pulled him down on her lap and began to rock him frantically. "He's only sleepy, Mrs. Shute. The penny came up."

"Well, I'd kind of watch him a little, if he were mine." Mrs. Shute, doubling her pointed arms up under the fringe of the red plaid shawl, turned to go. "You'd both better get right into bed and get a night's rest. He'll probably be all right by morning. Here's your father now," as she stepped out on the porch and encountered Mr. Marsh coming up the walk. "William T. swallowed a penny."

"Did it come up?" asked Mr. Marsh.

"Yes, it's up," assented Mrs. Shute.

"I guess he'll live then," he answered whimsically.

"He isn't showing quite the signs of life he was a few minutes ago," retorted Mrs. Shute in good-natured bantering.



Mr. Marsh was tired — tired and worried. Ardena gave him the rocker, laying the sleeping William T. down on the lounge. Alonzo, coming in, departed straightway for upstairs and bed, his heavy shoes clumping up the uncarpeted stairs. In passing, Alonzo had guiltily avoided glancing over at Ardena. But Ardena wasn't thinking about Alonzo at all.

"Father, do you think I'd better start the fire, or is it too late?" Ardena was questioning, solicitation in her voice and manner.

"No, no," Mr. Marsh answered wearily. "Let it go — let it go. It'll save a stick of wood."

"But don't you want to finish your newspaper or read your book?" Ardena insisted, surprise urging her fears.

"No, no," he refused. "I mustn't sit up so late nights burning oil and wood," and, worn out, he folded his hands listlessly, the coat sleeves falling frayed and faded about his wrists. "I only wanted to tell you to manage well, Ardena. Better days will come — after awhile. But for the present we'll have to draw in a little."

Ardena, though accustomed to a life of "drawing in" and hopefully expectant of the "better



day," was touched afresh by the direct appeal. "Yes," she answered.

Mr. Marsh slowly unfastened a knotted string and let a worn shoe fall heavily to the floor. "Don't think I'm finding fault, Ardena. You're doing well, child, well indeed. You're filling your mother's place."

"Yes," she answered, her voice low, her eyes large and deep behind the fluffy fringe of red hair.

But later, carrying a smoky little lamp up the steep flight of narrow stairs, she was revolving many things in her mind and her heart. One cannot be fourteen and forty at the same time. She would try again to be forty.



## CHAPTER III

### SPEAKING DAY

Washington's Birthday was "speaking day" in Arcadia. It was speaking day down in the first-reader room where William T. swung his fat little legs from the third seat in the first row. It was speaking day in the fifth room where Alonzo cartooned the pages of Potter's "Geography." And it was speaking day in the high school where Ardena, in the second semester of her first year, was beginning the study of the ablative case with the puzzling ablative absolute.

The Heralds and the Amphictyonic League, rival literary societies in the high school, had been lately organized and the chief spirit they fostered was that of bitter rivalry, a result which was both surprising and regrettable to the teachers who had advocated their establishment. The two societies were to meet every two weeks in separate classrooms, with a joint meeting every other session. The first joint meet-



ing fell on Washington's Birthday. On the twenty-second, then, was to occur the first formal contest — the trial of strength. But down in the fifth room they were to celebrate from a motive of patriotism alone. In the first room it was purely "speaking day."

Ardena was a Herald. Loyalty was one of Ardena's dominant traits; thus waiving the fact of but one invitation, to be a Herald had been her crowning ambition from the start.

"Father," Ardena said one day about a week before the twenty-second, as she tried to stir the sitting room fire into more life, "I'm on the debate for Washington's Birthday. I believe I'll just love debating. It's next to being a boy."

Mr. Marsh glanced up, his finger guarding the unwatched line. "Is that so? What is the subject of the debate?"

"Restricting immigration," Ardena responded, between pokes at the sizzling fire. "'I'm ag'in it,' to quote Mr. Shute."

"It seems to me that the subject is hardly suited to the occasion," he answered, amusement softening his plain features. "I don't much fancy that Franklin or Washington or any other colonist raised that question."



"Well, you see," Ardena was still struggling with the sizzling propensities of that log of wood, "I didn't have a thing to do with the program. Eliakim Meeker was chairman of the program committee and he put himself and Annabel Dilly against me and Reuben Green. Eliakim likes debates and that sort of thing and is good at it and Annabel Dilly is the biggest dig in the high school. She'd read all around a library to get ready. And he put Reuben Green with me. Why, poor Reuben stutters so that if he did have a thought he couldn't tell it! Eliakim's an Amphictyonic Leaguer, and we Heralds rather think it looks as if the Amphictyons had tried to put one over on us. I'm going to work my very hardest to win that debate for the Heralds, though. Dear, dear, this fire! Yes, I —"

But the clumsy rockers of the wooden chair had given a final and decided squeak and the crazy work cushion on its back fell limp. The magazine lay face downward on the red wool stand-cover.

"Ardena, give that poker to me," Mr. Marsh demanded in nervous exasperation. "If there's one thing a woman can't do it is to make a fire. Get me some paper and kindling and in the future leave the making of the fires to me. And by the way, Ardena, I don't like the habit you are getting into of



using high school slang. It may be expressive, but it is certainly not elegant English."

"Yes," Ardena replied quickly, "only —" But then she stopped short. Mr. Marsh was not to be trifled with. Recalled from the future of China to build a fire in a chilly sitting room was not mellowing Mr. Marsh's frame of mind. Besides, from the kitchen, the insistent voice of William T. was laying claim to a lump of brown sugar. So Ardena departed peaceably, if not in peace.

Saturday evening it was Mr. Marsh's unfailing habit to go down to Doctor Stubbs's house for a game of chess, "Doc" Stubbs being a lonely and eccentric old bachelor, much given to playing chess and talking politics. He had put on his shabby overcoat preparatory to facing the sharp north wind when he suddenly stopped with his hand on the kitchen door knob. "By the way, Ardena, how's the debate coming? I've just finished those articles on China I was interested in, so I'll have more time to help you. What did you say the subject was?"

Ardena was carrying a plate of bread and a pitcher of milk to the pantry. "It's about restricting immigration," she answered, pausing.

Mr. Marsh, again taking off his hat, became interested in the subject at once. "I'll stop at the library



on the way down to Doc's and look up some references. And I'll bring home some of the doctor's *Outlooks*. I remember that I saw an article in one of them that will help you. And I'll try to find time to-morrow evening to look over the back files of my magazines."

"Aw," Alonzo, leaning against the wall, kicked pugnaciously at the wainscoating, "don't go and get Ardena crazier than she is on debating. She's never around to tend to things — she's always off chasing up some papers. Debating isn't meant for girls," Alonzo concluded, his freckled face clouded with disgust.

Mr. Marsh turned around again, but his mind was apparently wandering from the subject in question. "Alonzo, I don't exactly like the way you have been tinkering with the old rocking chair. I wish that you would be more content to let things alone. I know that it does sway back uncomfortably if one is not watchful, yet I do not think that putting those old springs under the rockers will prove a remedy. I'll get a new chair before long and then we can put that one in my room. Stay home to-night, too. You've been going over to the Slocums' too many nights lately. This running around nights is a bad habit to get into. And don't



forget that your regular bedtime is eight o'clock. I'll try to be home early," and the old kitchen door was slammed loosely into its casing. Alonzo struck the wall a last protesting whack while Ardena hastened to replace the plate of bread and the pitcher of milk on the table and to give her immediate attention to William T., who was becoming insistent in his request for a second piece of some of Mrs. Shute's chocolate cake.

Thus the twenty-second was slowly but surely drawing nearer. Thursday evening Ardena hurried the family through supper. When the dishes were washed and put away she let the leaves of the table fall with a bang and shoved it back against the wall, the white oilcloth still wet and shining from its late cleaning. Then she brought out a thick stack of hastily written pages, laid the papers down on the table and buried her bushy head in her hands. The door leading into the sitting room was closed and Ardena for a time felt free to think. She had repeated to herself about three of the pages and was scribbling more notes on another sheet of paper when the door was wiggled open and William T. appeared, his large eyes round and serious.

"Dena, you didn't hear me say my piece yet to-night — you didn't."



With such a bold accusation as this confronting her Ardena was forced to give a moment's attention.

"Oh, William T.," she coaxed, "I know you know it. Why don't you say it to father?" She buried her head in her hands again, shut her eyes and began repeating her debate to herself.

"He doesn't look," William T. ruefully persisted. "He keeps reading right on along."

But as Mr. Marsh had continued to read, so Ardena continued to memorize her debate and at length the door was hitched shut with a slam.

Then Ardena was left undisturbed for a whole hour. It was Alonzo who next presented himself.

"Say, Ardena," he announced, a shade of uneasiness in his direct tone, "you're sure grandma'll have my pants in here to-morrow, aren't you? If I don't get those pants, I'll just have to stay home from school. You told her about making them short, didn't you? Grandmother always makes my duds big enough to fit me when I'm grown up."

"Alonzo, I know she knows you want those pants for to-morrow. She'll have them ready. Aunt Lib or Uncle Logan will bring them in. Now, don't keep fussing so all of the time. She knows how big you are."

"Well, say, Ardena, couldn't you just hear me



say my piece over once? I'd hate like sixty to forget it."

"Oh, Alonzo," and Ardena became petulant, "why on earth do I have to listen to that old 'Paul Revere's Ride' again? I could stand on my head and say it backwards now. Say it over to yourself and you'll know when you forget it."

"I suppose debating's something new," and instantaneously the door slammed.

Then there was an interval of two hours. At the end of that time the door knob turned again and Mr. Marsh appeared, lamp in hand.

"Come, come, Ardena. Let debating alone long enough to attend to the house. Never can tell when a light is going out on me. Come, you'd better go to bed now and let me have your lamp. Alonzo's been abed an hour and William T.'s asleep on the floor. I have only the last chapter to read and then I'm going, too."

And the next day was Friday. Ardena did not wait for company home at noon but ran down the street, across the church corner and through Slocum's empty lot. William T. was already at home. Ardena whisked the tablecloth on and put a stick of wood in the kitchen stove. It was some time before Alonzo burst in.



"Teacher kept us to tell us about this afternoon. My pants come?"

"There's father — ask him," Ardena answered as she pulled a pan from the cupboard with a clatter of falling tin. "I haven't been in the sitting room yet."

But Alonzo's star was fast whirling down the path of calamity. Mr. Marsh had forgotten to bring home the packages which Uncle Logan in his haste had so unluckily thought of leaving at the office. Alonzo only blinked at the news and, swallowing a half-cooked potato and some apple sauce, was off down the street.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Marsh said, as he absently brushed the crumbs from his vest. "I thought of those things every consecutive minute this morning until the last one. It will hurry Alonzo."

But Ardena was already scrubbing William T.'s hands and face and tying a treasured red necktie in a big bow. Then William T. departed, anticipating the ringing of the first bell by a quarter of an hour.

It was much later when Ardena was ready. Up before a cracked mirror in a low room with sloping walls Ardena was studying a varied assortment of apparel. But a blue ribbon about her neck and a gold brooch of her mother's she finally persuaded



herself were sufficient to balance an outgrown shirt-waist, a sagging skirt and a mass of red hair brushed to a flattened smoothness. When she was ready Ardena was radiant. She had even remembered to black her shoes.

Ardena found Leta Lindsey waiting for her in the corridor of the schoolhouse. Calm and composed Leta was prettier than ever in a crisp new silk waist and a faultlessly pleated skirt.

"You've forgotten your hair ribbon, Ardena," she gently reminded. "Here, I have two on my braid and I need only one. It's black and will look well with your hair. Now there, you're all right. Don't be one bit afraid, Ardena. We Heralds know you're a match for Eliakim and Annabel. Oh, why, what makes your shoes shine so funny? Oh, Ardena, I do believe it's stove polish! Well, never mind," she tactfully entreated, as Ardena hastily drew back her skirt. "It only shows when you look one way."

The big study-hall had an unfamiliar look. The girls were in strange and very new dresses and the boys seemed reserved and awkward in their stiff collars and best suits and polished shoes. There was an unaccustomed freedom to the place and the teachers kept themselves in the background.



The debate was the last thing on the program. Eliakim Meeker led off. Eliakim was a tall, thin, awkward youth who spoke from notes in a manner that attempted the easy and offhand. But Ardena listened most attentively and made a number of notes on a pad of paper. Reuben Green began the negative. Ardena knew that Reuben had a number of valuable points for their side, but poor Reuben delivered them in such a confused and stuttering manner that even Ardena had hard work to catch his meaning. Reuben didn't even finish and Ardena's pencil was flying across the paper with lightning strokes as Reuben, red-faced and perspiring, descended the steps from the platform. Then came Annabel Dilly. Annabel was very small and very thin and very white and very precise. Her big long braid of hair was combed straight back from a high forehead and her dress was skimpy and tight and dark. She read her debate. But she read it well, and the points she brought out were carefully selected, studied over and arranged. Ardena gave the closest attention to every word that Annabel so accurately enunciated.

And then before she fully realized it her turn had come. All absorbed in what she had to say she was entirely unconscious of the long aisle she was pass-



ing through, the steps she was mounting to the platform and the sea of faces she found below her. When she spoke there was decision in her voice and there was fire in her manner. She was confident of herself, for her arguments were varied and many and important. Her eyes shone large with excitement, her cheeks were flushed, and her hair, escaped from its recent flattening out, curled about her face in a bright wave of color. In spite of the out-of-date shirtwaist and the sagging skirt — yes, even in spite of the glistening shoes, Ardena standing there slim and straight and glowing made a pleasing picture. She felt her audience — she knew that she had aroused them and that she was carrying them with her. From confidence her mood passed easily into that of elation. In spite of a poor colleague she would win out yet — she would show the Amphictyons the real strength of the Heralds. She wanted to convince Eliakim Meeker that girls could debate as well as boys and she wanted to come out ahead of Annabel — her closest rival in classes.

The negative won. The Heralds were victorious over the Amphictyons. And to Ardena was given the credit for the outcome. Leta hugged her in a burst of excitement, the Herald girls surrounded her with exclamations of delight and the boys offered



congratulations. Ardena was radiantly happy and very self-satisfied.

Later, hurrying down the corridor to the cloak-room, she ran straight into Eliakim Meeker who was standing by the stairway. Ardena, still filled with her elated feeling of victory, was passing on when Eliakim stepped manfully forward and offered sincere congratulations.

"You did it well, Ardena," he said. "The whole school ought to be proud of you. You had the goods and you knew how to deliver them."

Ardena's elated spirits sank a little. She was too surprised and too humiliated to offer any return but a red-faced thank you and then to hurry on.

Out in the cloakroom Annabel Dilly stood waiting for her. She put out her small white hand and said in the most simple and sincere manner possible, "Congratulations, Ardena. I spent all of my spare time on my debate, but you had points I hadn't come across in my reading. You deserve all of the congratulations. And, Ardena, you did deliver it so well. There is fire and there is magnetism in your manner. I can dig, but I can't shine."

"Oh, Annabel," cried Ardena in the most humble of tones, "you always do well at anything you attempt! You are far more conscientious and pains-



taking than I ever can be. You know that father and Doc Stubbs read and talk politics together so much of the time. Well, they gathered together lots of my material. I feel terribly ashamed of myself now — I don't deserve all of the honor I have been given and you deserve more than you have been given." Then, confused, Ardena hurried into her wraps and went on out of the building.

Outside it was gloomy with a welcome chilliness in the air. Ardena pulled her tasselled tam o' shanter down on her head, thrust her hands deep into the pockets of her faded blue cloak and walked home, straight down the two streets that led to the old house with its bald rigid side to the front. Following the broken walk to the back of the house she was confronted by William T., huddled in a cold miserable little bunch on the doorstep. His face, inside the stocking cap, was swelled into a round red puff of woe and the treasured red necktie fell limp and bedraggled.

"Oh, William T., what is the matter now?"

A sudden outlet to a stifled sob and two grimy little fists rendered speech for awhile impossible. But time and patience were finally rewarded. William T. had forgotten his piece. Budge had remembered his. And Budge's mother arriving too late for that



part of the program in which her maternal solicitation were most concerned, Budge had again recited — this time exclusively to his mother. And both renderings were faultless.

“You — you didn’t pracus me ’nough times,” William T. accused. “Budge — his mother, she — she pracus him two times every day and two times every night he — he goes to bed. And — and Budge and ’nother girl, they tell me I forget all coming — home. They — they say teacher’s m — mad at me.”

Then Ardena became reflective. She wiped William T.’s smudgy little face with her stiff embroidered handkerchief and offered a lump of brown sugar by way of reparation.

But buoyancy did not return to Ardena’s spirits — it would take more than a lump of brown sugar. She silently swept the kitchen floor, washed the dishes left from the hasty noon lunch and filled the tea-kettle at the creaking pump.

Supper was almost ready when Alonzo came in. Cold and wet and tired from a falling mist, he silently hung his paper carrier’s bag on a nail by the door.

“Tired, aren’t you, Alonzo?”



There was no answer. Ardena opened the oven door and tried a plump brown potato with a fork.

"How was the speaking?" she questioned, bound to overlook discouragements.

"Where's the towel?" Alonzo, at the sink, was holding a dripping face in suspension.

Ardena made a dash for a clean one. "Did your pants fit?" she asked, growing bolder.

Alonzo's freckled face worked in an uncertain manner and his mouth twitched nervously. "Those pants came to my shoetops." He winced and went on. "I hurried so 't you could fix them if they needed it before I wore them, but you were gone. I told you to tell grandmother to be sure and make them short. I couldn't wear these old things I got on now to speak in and I wasn't going to be tardy. I had to leave those new ones on. The whole school kept snickering."

Ardena gave a little gasp. Mr. Marsh came in just then and she put the dish of potatoes and the platter of meat on the table and they sat down to eat. He looked tired and chilled and worried.

"How was the debate, Ardena?" he asked by way of sociability.

"The negative won," she responded quietly.



"Well, that's good news," her father answered, with a slight glow of interest. "I suppose," attempting a slightly jocular mood, "that you'll become interested in woman suffrage next."

But since Ardena offered no further information of any kind the family ate in silence, each apparently absorbed with his own thoughts. Finally William T., seeming to come forth from behind a slice of bread and butter, again took up the conversation.

"Budge says that teacher's mad at me. He says I spoiled speaking day."

Ardena met the accusation silently, momentarily expecting a bigger one from Alonzo. But it was worse than that — Alonzo was silent, his eyes intent upon the plate before him. Even William T., after a fruitless pause, turned his attention again to the diminishing slice, his troubles unshared. For grief does not heed grief. Ardena alone could feel it all — she was the cause of Alonzo's chagrin, of William T.'s failure and of her father's silent mood. That she had won in the debate was of little importance; she had paid too big a price for the victory.

She must do something now to win back the good will of the family. So leaving her supper before the others had finished she went into the sitting room. There she lighted the lamp and, despite the



fact of being a woman, built a cheery, blazing fire that lifted the dull dampness and warmed the bareness of the room to a homelike feeling. She placed a pair of worn carpet slippers at the back of the stove, picked up the wraps scattered about and tried to bring order to the laden center-table.

Later, after she had washed the dishes, swept the floor and made things ready for the morning she opened the door and went back into the sitting room. Peace and calm had taken possession of the place. The old rocker creaked a steady, gentle creak — Mr. Marsh was reading Dickens. Tipped against the wall Alonzo was deep in the pages of "The Life of P. T. Barnum" and stretched on the floor, his heels waving in the air, William T. was audibly making out the fast dimming lines of "I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in."

From a machine in the corner heaped and topped with papers and books and clothing Ardena unearthed a mending basket filled to overflowing with a conglomeration of scraps of cloth, snarled spools of thread and dangling pins and needles. Then bringing out the discarded trousers she sat down by the table. The warmth and the peace and the contentment of the room filled and satisfied her soul and the light came back to her face. After all,



sweeping and cooking, and mending, if not quite so exciting as debating, were certainly more satisfactory. If debating was next to being a boy, sewing was decidedly being a girl. Ardena preferred sewing.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE FIRST OF MAY

The woods were dull and lifeless, with a gray, uncompromising sky overhead and a rain-soaked earth beneath. Ardena, standing on the low bank of a muddy little stream, gathered her skirts together, flattened the faded tam down upon her head and jumped.

“Oh, Leta,” she wailed as she pulled first one foot and then the other from the squashy mud at the edge of the stream, “I thought I jumped farther. Dear, dear, dear!” squirming uncomfortably, “the water’s clear over the tops of my rubbers. Oo — oo — but isn’t it dreadful — just perfectly awful! Wait a moment and I’ll fix some sticks across. You’d die if you got this much mud on you. There,” as she gingerly gathered an armful of the damp underbrush and with awkward throws scattered it across the narrowest place in the stream, “now you’ll do better. Yes, throw the violets,” as two big bunches of damp flowers came flying through the air and fell between her outstretched hands.



"It's worth all our trouble, though," Leta was absorbed in the arduous task of cleaning the patches of mud from her rubbers, searching here and there for little tufts of the tangled wet grass, "because it's for Miss Miller. Really, don't you think, Ardena, that she's the very loveliest, loveliest teacher that you ever, ever knew? Oh, isn't mud too dreadful! I won't have any shine left on my rubbers. But she is the very sweetest teacher in the whole high school. I adore her more every day that I'm with her. And violets, you know, are her favorite flowers. Only I do wish they didn't have to grow where mud's so thick," she protested, as she broke a stick and applied it to the heel of her rubber. "Yes, I believe our last plan is the best — to tie the bunch with ribbon and fasten to it the verse of poetry that you're going to write. When I stop for the ribbon on my way home, I think I'll look for a pretty basket with a long handle to it. Then the whole thing will look simple and sweet and so like her. It's a wretched shame it's such a horrid May-basket night!"

"I should say so. My, but won't we have a fine big bunch! I never saw such big, dewy, purple violets in my life. And every single flower is for Miss Miller. Look, Leta," and Ardena lifted the bunch, "don't you think they're just the color of her eyes?"



I'm thinking every minute about the sweetest verse I can possibly write. There's 'blue' and 'true' and 'you' that I can use and there's 'violet' and 'not forget,' " Ardena rhymed, her voice trailing dreamily off. "To make it real poetical I'd like to bring in something about the 'lowing kine' but it doesn't exactly go with 'rhyme.' Then I could have brought it in with 'night so fine,' but that isn't really true. It's damp and drizzly and muddy and I'm afraid I won't feel inspired. If it had only been nice weather, I know I could have written an idyll like 'L'Allegro' and spoken of the 'russet lawns' (or probably the emerald lawns since this is spring) and 'nibbling flocks' and 'meadows trim with *violets* pied.' "

Leta, after carefully wiping her dark serge skirt with her handkerchief, placed the wad in the corner of her jacket pocket. "Oh, don't think about the night, Ardena. Think only of Miss Miller. Why, she's as tall and slender as a flower and as blithesome as a bird and, and — oh, Ardena, I'm not poetical at all but I feel as if I almost could be when I'm with Miss Miller. And don't put writing the verse off too late; you might not be able to think of the right word to rhyme or something like that."

Beneath the fringe of bright hair Ardena's eyes



kindled in merriment. "Leta, you're so funny — just a regular old dear! But do come on," as she started forward. "The biggest patch last spring was over here past these swinging grape-vines, I think. How dreary the woods look to-day! I feel as if the world were too big when it's like this."

"Aren't we going to have a perfectly beautiful bouquet! See how long these stems are. Can't you imagine how delighted Miss Miller will be?" Leta murmured, her attention centered on the evading violets at her feet. "Doesn't she look dear in that pretty dark blue dress? And don't you think she reads beautifully? I felt like crying to-day when she was reading 'The Prisoner of Chillon.' I love it anyway and then when she begins with,

" 'My hair is gray, but not with years,  
Nor grew it white  
In a single night,'

I feel myself growing all grand and creepy." Leta, her eyes glistening with emotion, was overlooking the purple at her feet.

Ardena straightened up, her dark eyes glowing. "Don't you love it — love it, Leta? But the very best of all was in 'The Lady of the Lake' when she read where it says,



“ ‘As chief, who hears his warden call,  
To arms! the foeman storm the wall,  
The antlered monarch of the waste  
Sprung from his heathery couch in haste.’ ”

But Leta had forgotten the violets entirely, her serious blue eyes intent upon the speaker before her who with eyes sparkling and cheeks flushing recited the stanza to the close.

“How grand!” Leta applauded when Ardena had finished. “Why, Ardena, it was almost like Miss Miller. When you began ‘A moment gazed adown the dale’ I grew all creepy and thrilly exactly as if Miss Miller really was saying it.”

“I can’t help it, Leta. I love that poem from beginning to end. I recite parts of it to Alonzo while we’re doing the dishes. But we must get to work again. It will be dark early to-night.”

For the next few moments they worked in silence with only now and then a crackling branch, a bird’s hurried flight or a distant tinkle of a cow bell to break the heavy solitude. Sky and earth were gray and lifeless.

“Oh, Leta, I haven’t told you yet what I was laughing at in the algebra class.” Ardena straightened up a moment, cramped from her bent position. “When Mr. Jackson was assigning the algebra



problems didn't you hear him say to George King, 'George, the third'? So now we've been calling George, 'King George III.' Don't you think it's a pretty good joke? I saw the joke right away and I wanted to whisper it to you, but old Jacky glowered at me so from under his shaggy eyebrows that I was afraid to. I just can't like him very well. And it seems to me that he's been unusually grouchy lately. Haven't you noticed it? And his scowl and his bristling hair and his shaggy eyebrows make me almost afraid of him. I'm glad Miss Miller is so different," concluded Ardena.

"I don't like him very well, either," Leta confessed. "His voice is so deep down in his throat he fairly makes me jump. I sometimes almost get creepy with fright when he comes and draws the crayon through my problem and says, 'Mish Lin-shey, you may write out the formula on page eighty-sish.'"

Ardena laughed until she held her sides for breath, one peal of merriment after the other echoing through the still woods. "But you don't look scared one bit. When I see him coming I turn back to the answer real quick so as to be sure I'll know it when I get it and I hurry right along. I wish he could see the beautiful May basket we are going to



give Miss Miller. Come on, Leta, we have more than enough now. And I've got to hurry home to get supper."

The evening was dark and misty and muddy. Holding an umbrella in one hand and a folded sheet of paper in the other Ardena ran down the wet boardwalk, across the muddy corner and up the main street to a large well-lighted house set back in a big yard. She went around to the back door where Leta, by the light within, was outlined in the doorway.

"I heard you coming," she called as she followed Ardena into the immaculate kitchen with the wooden clock ticking on the shelf. It was such a large, convenient, sanitary kitchen that Ardena was always held spellbound by its very shiningness and up-to-dateness. She did wish that her kitchen — "See, isn't it pretty!" Leta had led her to a kitchen table with a glistening sanitary table top and had picked up a basket. "I put the flowers outdoors when I came home and they're so crisp and fresh; and see how dainty the ribbon looks! I've tied it in all sorts of loops and bows, it was so long and narrow. White went the prettiest with purple. And isn't it the dearest basket — blue and lavender? See how long the handle is. It will hang on to the door knob



easily. But do read the poetry quick. I've been so anxious to hear it."

"Here it is. You tie it on and I'll say it. I know it." And while Leta punched a hole in the corner of the sheet of paper and strung a loop of the ribbon through, Ardena repeated the verse:

"Where the trees their shadows cast,  
Where the bird moves swift and fast,  
Where the brooks o'er pebbles flow,  
Where the squirrel runs to and fro,  
Where the breeze sings slow and soft,  
Where the branches toss aloft,  
Where the vines round tree trunks cling,  
Where the robins merriest sing,  
Where the plants grow fresh and green,  
Where the violets hide between,  
From there come we  
To thee."

Leta's serene face was all wonder and admiration. "It's perfectly beautiful, Ardena! How could you ever do it? Why, it sounds just like Miss Miller. It goes along sort of soft and smooth like 'Elaine.' " Leta gave a little satisfied pat to the bow of ribbon. "Don't you really hope she'll recognize your handwriting? Wait a moment until I get my coat and cap. And I suppose I'll need my rubbers and umbrella for it seems to be raining pretty hard," she



called back, as the door leading into the dining room swung back after her.

But when Leta returned again to the kitchen she returned as she had gone except for a very different expression. She was followed by Mrs. Lindsey, a practical and solicitous mother.

"I think Leta had better not go," she said to Ardena. "It's starting to rain harder and she'd better stay at home. Why don't you wait until to-morrow night, Ardena?"

Ardena always felt shy and restrained before Mrs. Lindsey. Yet she managed to say this time in timid self-defense, "But this is May-basket night. I can take the basket on over myself, though. I'm wet already," surveying her damp shoes and skirt.

"Well, Ardena," said Mrs. Lindsey, probably with more common sense than tact, "you had far better be home taking care of the house and your brothers than wading around in the rain and mud on such a very silly errand. I should think your father would be more strict with you children."

Ardena's face reddened. She almost gave expression to the burst of wrath that surged up within her. But she managed to gain control of herself even if she did feel hot and damp and miserable and to say apologetically, "But I wanted to do some-



thing for Miss Miller. She's been very nice to me and — and I thought this a good chance to do — something nice for her. If you'll give me the basket, Leta, I'll take it on over."

Outside there was a steady downpour of rain. Leta followed Ardena out on the porch to express her regret at not being able to go with her and to give Ardena minute directions about finding the place. But Ardena's brain was in too much of a whirl to keep anything straight. She was glad that it was cool outside and she really rather liked the rain. Hurrying on down the street, holding the basket carefully in one hand and trying to steady the umbrella with the other, she began to feel happier. Ardena liked adventure and here was a chance. It was very dark and shiny and slippery and she hurried on down the street as rapidly as she could. She had to pass through the empty downtown streets and then go on to the opposite side of the town.

It rained and rained and rained. Ardena was quite soaked. Her rubbers leaked and her shoes became wet and soggy and her coat was damp. The umbrella grew heavy. But buoyed up by the thought of the pleasure her errand would bring to Miss Miller she kept steadily on. She was in an un-



familiar part of the town now and she was a bit confused. But she knew that she was on the right street; and that she must soon come to two houses — exactly alike — in the middle of the block up a very high bank. Miss Miller roomed in the first house and Mr. Jackson in the second. Yes, Miss Miller was in the first house. Or was it the second? No; it was the first, she was sure. But she wasn't sure, either. She really wasn't very sure of anything except that her feet were very wet and the umbrella very heavy and that her head felt hot and was aching very badly. Was it the first or the second house? She wished that she had listened more attentively to Leta. Or that she had put Miss Miller's name on the basket. Why, they had forgotten all about putting Miss Miller's name on the basket! But maybe Miss Miller would recognize her handwriting. But if she did, then half the fun of hanging May-baskets was gone. She wished that her throat wasn't so dry and that she didn't have to swallow so high.

Ardena finally reached the long flight of steps that led up to the house. It still rained — that persistent, monotonous fall. That was a long flight of steps — a very long flight — a flight so long that it made Ardena tired to think about climbing them.



But growing excited again in the thought of this, the most thrilling part of the adventure, which was already upon her, she began to mount the steps cautiously, her shoes sinking down into puddles of water collected in the center of each of those very many steps.

She was soon up in the yard and was taking her bearings. Before her was a large house with a long porch across the front and more steps up to that porch. The front door was a Colonial door with a knocker and a row of little window panes across the top. A rose colored light was shining through this row of window panes and also from beneath the lowered shade of the front window.

Ardena tiptoed up the cement walk to the house and up the steps to the porch. Her adventure was fast approaching the thrilling climax. Could she hang the basket on that door, lift that knocker and jump down from that porch without being caught?

The porch creaked with a big crack as she stepped upon it. She waited. Yes, she believed that she could easily fasten the basket to that door knob, lift that knocker and get safely away without being caught. She closed the umbrella and then waited again. She approached the door. Involuntarily she glanced through the lower row of small win-



dow panes that came just within her range of vision. But with a gasp Ardena fell back from her strained position. She forgot to hang the May-basket — she forgot all about the May-basket in her hand. Then Ardena looked again — to be sure. There was a big grate and a glowing fire and a settee drawn up before the fire. And sitting on that settee were Miss Miller — and MR. JACKSON.

Ardena's footsteps must have attracted their attention for both glanced over at the door. Ardena was recalled to herself with a flash. With one quick thoughtless movement she fastened the basket to the door knob, lifted the knocker and scurried off the porch.

The next day Ardena remained at home from school with a cold and sore throat. She prepared the breakfast and helped her father and the boys get off and then dropped down on the sitting room lounge. Mrs. Shute came over with salve and flannels and hot lemonade and good advice and a deserved reprimand for such carelessness. By evening she was feeling better. After four Leta came in.

“Ardena,” she asked at once, “who did you hang that May-basket for — Miss Miller or Mr. Jackson?”



"I'm sure I don't know," Ardena truthfully answered.

"Well," pondered Leta, "it's queer, anyway. In algebra class this morning Mr. Jackson wore a small buttonhole bouquet of violets tied with a piece of white ribbon and in English Miss Miller wore a big bouquet of violet in her belt tied with lots of white ribbon. And, Ardena, truly I couldn't tell which looked the happier of the two. Mr. Jackson was sweet as sugar and even joked and laughed with us in class. Why, I'm beginning to think that I'm going to like him when I know him better. As for Miss Miller — well, she honestly never did look so perfectly charming — a new blue dress — and those flowers at her belt. And she smiled at us every minute and read to us the most of the hour. It's queer, isn't it?"

And Ardena agreed that it was.



## CHAPTER V

### THE FOURTH OF JULY

In June the first year of Ardena's high school life came to a close. And considering the many things that one had to consider in estimating Ardena's life it was a very successful close, for Ardena's grades were such as to give her ample exemption from the final examinations. Then, also, in June Ardena was fifteen. She was tall now, slender but wiry, and more sober and dependable than at fourteen. Aunt Lib often praised her and grandmother charitably found little fault. At fourteen Ardena could hang May-baskets with considerable of the excitement of childhood but at fifteen with a long, hot, busy summer stretching before her she realized that she felt sober and dependable. Another sultry Iowa summer was upon them. There was much to do and she tried to maintain the steady, stick-at-it spirit which keeps housework in an adequate state of preparedness for any and all emergencies.

But there were many stumbling blocks along the



path that led to the goal of Ardena's good intentions.

For the third time, on one hot July afternoon, Mr. Marsh appeared in the bedroom doorway, his sparse hair rumpled and his face red from the exertion of putting on a stiff-bosomed white shirt. "Ardena," he called in nervous exasperation, "I never did see the equal of these shirts. The first one I put on had the sleeve half torn out and the next one was too big in the neck and here this, my last and my best one, has two buttons missing."

Ardena, packing a shrunken old valise stretched out on the bumpy carpet lounge, glanced up at the coatless, shoeless, incensed figure in the doorway and her eyes kindled in amusement.

Mr. Marsh's irritability was strengthened. "Ardena," he said with decision, "I should think you would be more systematic and look ahead a little. Any girl who has passed her fifteenth birthday and will be a sophomore in the high school next year should have acquired more stability of character. When a button is off a garment, sew another one on."

Ardena's smile ended in an uncontrollable fit of laughter as she caught the sense of the argument and noted anew her vexed and excited father. "I can't help it," she tried to apologize.



Still grasping the offending shirt Mr. Marsh looked over at her. "Ardena," he remarked with dignity, "I do think you are cultivating an unpleasantly loud and harsh voice for a woman. I believe with Shakespeare as regards a woman's voice."

Ardena made a final struggle and gained control of herself. "Give the shirt to me, father, and I'll fix it in a minute. Your valise is about ready. You'll have to hurry to catch the two-twenty train."

"Yes, yes," Mr. Marsh conceded, his thoughts turned into another channel, "I know I must. Now, sew the buttons on strong and wind the thread around them," and the bedroom door closed again.

Some fifteen minutes later Mr. Marsh, in his best black suit, issued from the bedroom and hastily grasped the valise and umbrella Ardena had ready for him. "I'll be home the day after the Fourth. I wish I had had more time to plan my trip, but the telegram was urgent and if I stand a chance of getting that printing contract I must go at once. This is a very opportune time since the governor is billed to speak there the Fourth, and of course I shall stay for the speech."

"Say, dad —" Alonzo had sidled forward from the out-of-the-way location of the kitchen doorway. "Say, dad," he began again, "it doesn't look like



we're going to have much of a Fourth. I gave you my last paper money to help pay for my suit and we haven't got a cent now."

Mr. Marsh glanced down at the sober-faced Alonzo before him, looked at him again and then set the valise and umbrella on a chair and nervously drew forth a limp worn purse and opened it. "I am sorry — very sorry — but I can't spare more than a dime, Alonzo. This sudden departure is cramping me and this is all the loose change I have. I must hurry," he continued as he replaced the purse and pulled out a big nickel watch. "I'm late now. Spend the dime and I'll tell you about the speech when I come back. Next Fourth we'll do better," and Mr. Marsh hastily kissed Ardena and Alonzo. After a farewell with William T. who, black of face and hands, emerged from the back yard at the last moment, he hurried down the hot, dusty street.

William T. returned again to the pleasures of mud pies and Budge's company, Alonzo disappeared in the kitchen and Ardena went upstairs to change her dress. When she came down a half hour later in a blue gingham, she saw Leta, immaculate in a white linen Peter Thompson and protected from the glaring sun by a changeable silk parasol, coming up the walk.



"I stopped for you to go downtown with me," Leta said, as Ardena threw open the screen door at her approach. "I have to take my library book back and do some errands. Can you go?"

"Yes, I'd like to," Ardena answered joyfully, and she picked up a crumpled hat from the machine and pinned it carelessly on her fluffy hair. "I only have to get some sugar," she continued, as she later shared the half of the changeable silk parasol while walking down the street, "but this'll be a good chance to show you the hat maybe I'm going to buy. It was just put in the window yesterday. It's be-a-u-tiful!"

Some blocks farther down the dusty main street with its noisy rattling of farm wagons and grocery carts Ardena excitedly touched the starchy sleeve of Leta's white linen. "Here it is," she whispered as they stopped before Mrs. Muldoon's show window, gaudily brilliant in the July sun. "It's the one on the tallest spindle — right there." Then she waited while Leta's critical eye scanned the gracefully drooping brim — the brim that had just the four droops to it, the correctly (if somewhat stiffly) poised wreath of wonderfully pink roses and the three loops of black velvet that a shining buckle so tightly secured.



"Leta, don't you think it's the prettiest — the very most beau-ti-ful hat that you ever — ever saw? Do — don't you think I would look — well, that it would be becoming to me?"

From the gaudy show-window Leta's deliberate gaze turned to Ardena, to the flattened, faded brown hat about which the red hair kinked and curled. "Mother says," (Leta was indirectly making known her own opinion) "that plainer hats are more serviceable for all occasions. But," unconsciously glancing up at Ardena's rather nondescript head-gear, "I think it will be more becoming than the one you have on. But, of course, I can't tell exactly until I see it on you. Let's go in and try it on."

"Oh," Ardena was rather startled by the suddenness of the proposition, "I — I hadn't thought about trying it on. I'm not quite ready to buy it yet. And this — this old one feels real comfortable. Then — then, isn't July a little too early for Leg-horns?"

"Why, no indeed," Leta was fully confident on this subject, "I had one as early as May once. Come on and we'll go in and see how it looks on you."

Ardena's face clouded dubiously. "No, Leta, I



think we'd better not. You see I'm not ready to buy just yet and — and —"

But in some matters Leta's gentle spirit could assume a leading part. "It won't hurt to go in and see about it. We don't do our trading here, but I guess the place is all right. I'll do the talking." Leta's changeable silk parasol collapsed with a click and she led the way into the store.

Mrs. Muldoon, who soon appeared from behind a curtain at the rear of the store, was a complacent, easy-going individual quickly manifesting signs of being anxious to make a sale at this dull season of the year.

"It will do very well," was Leta's final decision as she viewed the hat adorning the otherwise somewhat shabby-looking Ardena. "Maybe you'd better decide to take it right along with you. It might be gone if you waited."

But the light in Ardena's eyes was dying out. She recalled the price of the hat — an inaccessible four dollars. "I haven't really made up my mind yet — and — and my old one feels real comfortable and — and isn't it a little early for Leghorns? Then — then maybe I'd better wait until grandmother or Aunt Lib can get in to see it."

From this confused and muddled state of affairs



Ardena was rescued by the more diplomatic Leta. "We didn't expect to buy a hat," she was calmly explaining to the urgent Mrs. Muldoon, "when we started downtown this afternoon. But," in the manner of a suggestion, "maybe you could lay the hat aside and Ardena could get it next time she came down."

"Never mind about the money," offered the magnanimous Mrs. Muldoon. "It is late in the season and I make allowances. She can take the hat along and stop in to settle for it when she finds it convenient."

Ardena, her eyes again drawn to the hat poised on the tips of Mrs. Muldoon's fingers, to its droops and its loops and its shining newness, hesitated, pondered and grew persuaded. "I've saved three dollars for a new hat," she burst into confidence. "And my father'll give me the other dollar when he comes home from Mapleton." And then Mrs. Muldoon becoming quite pressing in the extension of her credit Ardena finally consented.

And so a few minutes later Ardena, with the crackling paper bundle carefully clasped in her hot tense fingers, shared the half of the changeable silk parasol back down the street to the grocery store. Later, after parting with Leta at the church corner,



she hurried along the side street. Approaching Mrs. Shute's little white cottage sheltered behind a screen of bushes and flowers and vines, Ardena softened the clicking of her heels on the boardwalk and was glad that only the knot of Mrs. Shute's hair was visible above the gooseberry bush as she leaned over her pansy bed. And the soles of Mr. Shute's carpet slippers appearing through the lilac bush as his feet rested on the porch railing were an indicator of an overcoming drowsiness.

Ardena turned in at the bare, sunburned old house next door and went around the dry, withered yard to the back steps. The voices of Alonzo and William T. came from the woodshed, so Ardena hurried through the kitchen, depositing the sack of sugar on the table, and went up the uncarpeted stairs. Back under the bed in one of the low-walled rooms, away back to the corner where the rag carpet did not stretch, she pushed the bulky, unwieldy bundle. Her grandmother had told her that credit was next to stealing. She wondered if she really should have brought the hat home. Maybe she had better have waited until she had asked grandmother or Aunt Lib or Mrs. Shute about it. But if she had waited she might have lost it altogether. She meant to explain the whole thing to her father when he came



home. And even he had noticed that she needed a new hat. Really, one must learn to take advantage of an opportunity. So, light-hearted again, she went down to the kitchen and catching up the empty chip basket ran on out to the woodshed. In the doorway she stopped short.

“Alonzo Marsh, what *are* you up to now!” On the floor of the dark loose-boarded shed were a tub of water, a litter of all shapes and sizes of bottles, Alonzo and William T.

Alonzo let the water bubble from a bottle and then looked up while his freckled face broke into a broad, eager smile. “Ardena, I’ve got a scheme,” he commenced confidentially. “I’m —”

“Oh, Alonzo! what now! Oh, do take more care of William T!” Ardena let the chip basket fall and pulled the splashing William T. away from the tub. “Alonzo, you must be more careful. See how soaked he is.”

“I am careful,” Alonzo assured her, as he took the dripping bottle, wiped it and stood it on end by the wall. “See, that’s the twenty-third bottle. Don’t they look nice and shiny?” Alonzo straightened himself to gaze with admiration upon the varied row of bottles lengthening along the dusky side of the shed.



"But what are you going to do with all these bottles? Alonzo, while father was gone I did hope you wouldn't get into anything."

"I'm not in anything. Did you know, Ardena, that we're going to have the blazingest Fourth of July you ever saw. I'm going to sell these bottles for two dollars, or maybe more, and get some fireworks."

"But you can't sell those bottles."

"Yes, I can too. I saw all those bottles down cellar going to waste, so I asked Herb Smiley in at Sailor's drug store if they ever bought old bottles back and he said, 'Sure thing,' and, when I asked him for how much, he said, 'Couldn't tell till he saw the cargo.' Isn't this a dandy pile? Doc Stubbs gave me those in that basket and Mrs. Shute those in that box and I found those green ones downtown in the alleys. Then to-morrow I'm going over to Petersons' and Buschbaums' and some of the other neighbors and I'll bet I make as much as two dollars anyway. Might possibly get three dollars for the whole lot, but I guess I'd better count on two."

Although a bit dubious about the outcome of this venture Ardena was reluctant to do or say anything that would dampen Alonzo's enthusiasm and optimism. At any rate he might be able to sell some



of them and this amount added to the ten cents would make a small Fourth for the boys.

"But the Fourth is day after to-morrow, Alonzo," she said. "Do you think you will have time to get the bottles together and washed and in shape?"

Alonzo instantly became businesslike. His freckled face, under the tumbled damp hair, grew dubious and he frowned in sober thought. "It'll make me hustle," he admitted, shaking a bottle half-full of water, the drops sprinkling his blue calico waist in a soaking spray.

"Well, I'll help you," Ardena offered. "There won't even be a torpedo going off around here and things will be pretty quiet."

"We can have a Fourth all right now," Alonzo answered with enthusiasm rising again. "I'm going to get some firecrackers and some repeaters and some red light and some Roman candles and maybe a balloon and some flags, sure, to nail up on the front of the house. Say," looking up suddenly at his sister, "but I'm ashamed that we haven't had a good big flag before this. I've told dad that I thought we ought to have one and he's said he'd try to keep it in mind. Suppose we get the flag first — and a good big one, too — one like the Slocums'; one big enough to make us feel real patriotic."



All that evening, until the thickening dusk filled the low, roughly-built room of the shed the three worked together. Alonzo washed the bottles, Ardena polished them and William T., with infinite patience, ranged them in even rows along the wall.

“Don’t they shine!” Alonzo exclaimed proudly, as he stopped a moment to gaze upon the wealth and splendor of his collection. “There’s eighty-seven not counting that broken one and I’ll bet I get as many to-morrow. I’ve got to get up early and go to work because I must get started with the load right after dinner, if I’m going to get all of them sold by night. Set the alarm clock, Ardena, and let’s get up at five, will you?”

But it was six instead of five the next morning when Ardena hurried down the stairs. The rusty old alarm clock had failed to sound. Later, when Alonzo came running into the kitchen, Ardena was toasting bread.

“Breakfast ready, Ardena? That old clock isn’t worth a cent. I thought I fixed it good, too. I’ll eat and hurry over for those other bottles and get back as soon as I can and get them washed. I haven’t got much time to waste,” he concluded, as he sank his face in a wash basin of cold water.



"Oh, Alonzo," Ardena at the stove let the bread she was toasting sink until it blackened, "I've planned out so many things, too! I'm going to send out word by Ike Martin to tell Aunt Lib and Uncle Logan to come in. Aunt Lib said Saturday when they were in that they weren't going over to Independence for the celebration. It was too far to take the children. Now won't that be fine!"

But Alonzo, with only a brief nod of approval, was eating his dish of oatmeal and a dry piece of toast before departing on his morning's errands. When he was gone Ardena gave the third call to William T. from the foot of the stairway and came back to the lumpy oatmeal and the burnt toast.

It was about eleven o'clock that a distant, jerky, tuneless whistle caused William T. to dart down the street in a stumbling, frantic rush to help trundle the red wagon around the yard to the back door. Ardena greeted them from the kitchen doorway as she wiped her wet hands on her gingham apron.

"Did you get them? Oh, what a dandy big lot! I'll come right out and help you. I'm going to bake a cake this afternoon," she hurried on, her words tumbling over one another in her haste. "And I saw Ike just as he was starting out and he said he'd be sure to give the note to Aunt Lib.



Leta's going over to Independence for the day, but we'll have just as much fun as —"

"I've got fifty-two here and every one needs washing," Alonzo was already busy carrying bottles from the wagon to the shed. "They'll sell better if they're clean. Lenny Slocum said that Gilson and Adams had their window chuck full of fireworks this morning. You can get two bunches of little firecrackers for a nickel or one big one. And Lenny said that he never heard the repeaters go off as loud as they do this year. He shot one off for me. Jiminy, but I jumped!" Nervous with excitement, his eyes shining and his mouth twitching, he began rolling up the sleeves of his waist. "And, Ardena," he presently called back from the interior of the shed, "they've got some canes in — ten cents apiece. I'll get one for William T. so that he can't get hurt. The Billings twins have one apiece. And Perky Thompson's going to carry my papers to-night for two bunches of firecrackers."

It was not until two o'clock that everything was in readiness. Then Alonzo with his face glistening from a recent scrub and his hair falling from below his straw hat in damp rings carefully pulled the rattling, swaying wagon out to the dusty sidewalk and down the street, William T. at his side.



“Good luck,” Ardena called from the doorway and then went back to the scorching kitchen and the half-completed cake. By four o’clock the kitchen floor was scrubbed and a cocoanut cake was dripping its snowy frosting down the side of the pan as it stood on the shining oilcloth of the kitchen table. Ardena, up in the close, hot little room under the sloping roof, was fastening the collar of a shrunken gingham dress. Then from beneath the bed she carefully drew out the paper bundle and unpinned the crackling paper. She had almost forgotten, in the excitement of the morning, what it looked like. But it was all there as she remembered it — the loops and the droops and the pink roses and the shining buckle. With delicate care she lifted the hat by the edge of the brim and set it on her head. The cracked little mirror above the high battered bureau was true to her anticipation. The hat was beautiful and — yes — it even made her beautiful. Never in all her life had her apparel been selected because of its beauty. She was used to things that lasted — and then could be made over. With hesitating care she finally started a hatpin into the sleek and shining crown, but the crackling of the straw seemed so loud she feared to spoil the absolute newness of it all and so she drew the pin carefully out again and tak-



ing off the hat laid it gently down on the patchwork quilt of the bed. The money — the three dollars — was in a little box in the corner of the upper bureau drawer and Ardena took it from its hiding-place. There was the dollar her father had given her for her birthday and a dollar that grandmother had given her and another dollar in small change that she had saved from time to time. Just one more dollar when her father came home and the hat would be hers! Her grandmother might question the durability of such a hat, but Ardena was going to promise to wear it only for very best. Even if it wasn't paid for, it soon would be and she believed that it would be all right to wear it on the Fourth with her best white dress. Ardena jubilantly caught up the hat again. Its newness and freshness charmed her and she must try it on once more.

Knowing that the boys would be hungry and remembering that the fireworks were to be purchased that evening Ardena made preparations for an early supper. The creamed potatoes and the scrambled eggs and the apple sauce were ready by half-past five o'clock, but Alonzo and William T. had not arrived. At six o'clock the supper was still warm, but by half-past six it had grown dry and cold on the back of the stove. It was nearly seven when Ardena heard the



boys returning. The evening sun, from between the trunks of the maples, shone full upon the table covered with the red tablecloth and set with the three plates. The tea kettle hummed on the back of the stove and the flies buzzed outside.

Ardena hurried to the yard and helped Alonzo draw the wagon full of swaying, glistening bottles to the woodshed. Hot and tired and covered with dust Alonzo drew one foot after the other up the back steps to the kitchen and Ardena helped William T., lagging in the rear, to the house. Alonzo sank into his place at the table, William T. silently climbed to his high chair and Ardena served them. She had forgotten that she herself had not eaten and that the customary washing of hands and faces, doubly needed upon this occasion, had been omitted.

"Alonzo, why couldn't you sell them?" she finally got up courage enough to ask, as she came up from the cellar with a pitcher of lemonade.

Alonzo set his half drained glass of lemonade down and frowned. "Mr. Sailor said Herb didn't know what he was talking about — he's always fooling. They never bought old bottles back. Any more potatoes?"

"But didn't you try other places?"

"Yes, I did. Went to all four drug stores and a



couple of grocery stores and the vinegar works and the brewery. This all the lemonade? Tastes good."

"We — we went all over town." William T. seemed to wake up as Ardena placed the dishes on the table. "My feet got hot and I didn't get any ride home. All the bottles took the room."

"Wouldn't care," Alonzo winced, "if I hadn't invited Perky Thompson and Lenny Slocum over and told them what I was going to have," and Alonzo again gave his attention to his plate and glass of lukewarm lemonade.

Alonzo and William T. ate in silence and Ardena sat by the kitchen window, silent also. It was dusk when Alonzo drained the last glass of lemonade and slid down from his chair, William T. following. A little later they went off upstairs to bed, but not until Ardena had tactfully enticed them into washing off some of the dust with which they were covered. When they were gone and Ardena was left alone to think it all over, her cheeks began to glow with an angry flush. Out there by the doorstep the wagon-load of bottles glistened in the thickening darkness. On the floor above sounded a few faint footfalls and then there was silence. Ardena jumped to her feet, her lips straight, her eyes bright. Lighting a lamp



she opened the door and went softly up the stairs. Up in her own room she set the lamp on the bureau and from beneath the bed drew forth the paper bundle and placed it on the bed. Then she opened the bureau drawer, took the money from the box and tied it in her handkerchief. She would manage things herself. She didn't look at the hat again — she didn't want to. It only emphasized, by contrast, the poverty that surrounded them. Never, never — never in their lives had they had a Fourth of July celebration; they had never had a Christmas, nor even a Thanksgiving. Poor, poor, poor! Her cheeks glowed, her eyes burned. Grandmother or Aunt Lib had given them their good times — all they had known. And now had been their own chance to make the good time. They were too poor to go and buy the celebration outright and so Alonzo had schemed and planned and worked — all for nothing. Leta had everything — money and pretty dresses and a good time. And Lenny Slocum had everything that a boy of his age needed for his best development. As for Budge Cracker — the tears came into her eyes — he had enough for two small boys. Poverty — how she hated it! It met her now in the long, tired breathing of the children in the next room, in the recollection of the glistening



bottles in the yard below, it surrounded her in her own low, bare, little room, it confronted her in the paper bundle on the frayed patchwork quilt. She could stand it,—but they couldn't and they shouldn't. At least they could afford to be patriotic — yes, just as well as the Lindseys and the Slo-cums and the Crackers. It was her very duty to her country and her God to teach her brothers patriotism. She squeezed the handkerchief, heavy with the three dollars, tight in her hand, grabbed with an angry clutch at the paper bundle, picked up the lamp and descended the stairs.

The sky was heavy with the fullness of the stars and the street lamp on the corner was spreading lacy shadows along the sidewalk when Ardena, on her way home, passed Mrs. Shute's vine-covered picket fence, her arms heaped with bundles.

"My land, Ardena, what all are you bringing home this time of night?"

"Oh," Ardena started, "I didn't see you, Mrs. Shute!"

"Well, here I am anyway." Mrs. Shute leaned over the fence, her face, in the light from the street lamp, bright and interested. "Ebenezer's just gone off to bed, but it was so hot I was wandering around in the yard a little to cool off. I saw you going



downtown about dark with a bundle considerable like a hat bundle. What all have you got there? ”

“ Fireworks,” Ardena answered, with a note of defiance in her voice and manner.

“ Well, I do hope you’ll take them out as far as Hill’s pasture to shoot them off. You’ve got enough there for the whole neighborhood.” Mrs. Shute’s voice was showing considerable concern. “ But these bundles aren’t like the one I saw you carrying downtown awhile ago,” she said, reverting again to a former topic.

“ I took a new hat back and spent the three dollars in fireworks.”

“ For goodness’ sake, Ardena Marsh, burning up good hard-earned dollars when you need a new hat about as much as anyone ever did! You’re big enough to be getting some sense.”

Ardena stood up straight and tall, her arms tightening about the bundles. “ Mrs. Shute,” she cried excitedly, “ I can’t help it if you don’t like it — I’m not one bit ashamed of what I’ve done. I thought that we were too poor to have a Fourth like other folks, but I’ve decided that we are not. And I don’t intend to let the boys think we are, either. I can go without a hat, but we can’t afford to go without a flag. Why, I’d rather go all summer, and all



winter, too, without a hat than to be disloyal to my country. I've made up my mind that I'm neglecting my duty to my small brothers to let them grow up unpatriotic. Other children aren't growing up that way. I don't think it's worthy of the descendants of a Revolutionary soldier."

Mrs. Shute recovered from her surprise. "I like your way of looking at things, too. Money going up in fireworks never bothers me, but Ebenezer can't ever see but straight ahead."

"My ancestor fought in the Revolutionary War," continued Ardena, "and we've got his silver shoe-buckle yet, and he wouldn't have much respect for one of his descendants who wouldn't rather celebrate in his memory than have a new hat. He wouldn't care if we were poor, but I believe he'd just hate a slacker in his line. And my own grandfather fought in the Civil War and my mother used to tell me how she cried all day long on the stair steps when Abraham Lincoln died."

Mrs. Shute folded her pointed elbows across her black and white calico, checked by the swinging shadows of the street lamp, and her thin, keen features softened with a beam of delight. "I like your spunk, Ardena. But, by the way, Alonzo didn't sell those bottles, did he?"



Ardena's face sank with a softened memory. "He didn't sell a one — not a one. And — and we had planned the celebration — and invited the folks. We were going to have you and Aunt Lib and Uncle Logan and grandmother and the children, and then Alonzo invited Lenny Slocum and Perky Thompson and we were going to have cake and lemonade and the fireworks. But we're going to have the celebration anyway," Ardena ended with a little note of triumph in her voice.

"I was doubtful about his selling those bottles all along, but he seemed so anxious to try that I didn't like to discourage him. But you go right on and get ready for the evening and I'll come. And," she whispered as she leaned over the top of the fence, "I'll bring the ice cream. Ebenezer'll make a big stew about having the muss around, but he'll help me out if I manage him right. He seems to be feeling real miserable this hot weather. I'll bring the freezer chuck full to the gallon."

Ardena gave a little jump of delight. "Oh, Mrs. Shute, you are so lovely! You, oh, you're such a dear! If I hadn't these bundles, I'd hug you. Alonzo and William T. will be wild with delight when I tell them."

Mrs. Shute straightened to her erect carriage.



"But you children must let those big, dangerous fireworks alone until evening when we grown folks will be there, if you want me to help with the refreshments. Ever since your father has been gone, I've eaten and slept and worked with one ear open and all ready to run if I heard an alarm."

"I promise," Ardena said as she hurried on towards the shambling, slanting old house next door, her feet buoyed by the wings of anticipation and her face towards the door, radiant with the great secret.

Very early the next morning the crackling of a bunch of small firecrackers brought two hot, sleepy-eyed boys to the little upstairs window. A series of snapping torpedoes brought two excited little fellows scurrying down the steep flight of stair steps. On the cleared-off sitting room table lay package upon package of red and white bundles. In one breathless sentence Ardena tried to tell them all about it, omitting the return of the Leghorn hat and speaking casually of her slowly accumulated three dollars. She dwelt in glowing detail upon the celebration that was in store for them that evening.

With a wild burst of overflowing joy Alonzo sought to express the emotions surging through him. He clapped his hands, he gave a whoop, he turned a



handspring; and then he fled out the door and around the house with one wild hoot of happiness, his nightgown flapping about his bare, flying legs. William T., catching the mood, attempted an equally enthusiastic imitation of it all. Ardena sought to divert their minds from such rash manifestations of appreciation and so proposed, when properly clothed, that they assist in decorating the front of the house with the bunting and flags.

Such material things as Leghorn hats were long since forgotten.



## CHAPTER VI

### IN HONOR OF WILLIAM THADDEUS

July had been hotter than June, and August had been hotter than July. And the hottest day of all that hot summer was the last Sunday in August.

Ardena, in limp blue calico, was attempting to smooth off with two half-warm irons a very much needed very thin dress. The kitchen was low and close so that even the slight fire seemed to add intensely to the heat. Ardena had pushed the irons to the back of the stove and was folding up the ironing-board when a squeak of new shoes on the doorstep announced the home-coming of William T. Under the shining brim of the straw hat his round fat face gleamed red and perspiring and the white blouse waist hung wrinkled and wilted.

"I'm going to take off these old hot shoes. I wish't they'd have barefooted Sunday schools," he declared doggedly, as he seated himself on the floor.

But Ardena was squeezing the ironing-board behind the door in the pantry. Later, when she came



up from the cellar with a pan of potatoes, William T., barefooted, was thoughtfully poking his stubby forefinger through a hole in the top of his hat.

“Oh, oh, William T.!” Ardena set the pan of potatoes on the table with a thump. “Why, that’s your best hat!”

“I don’t care,” William T. replied from the middle of the floor, “’tisn’t as big as Budge’s, anyway.”

Ardena hung the hat up on one of the many convenient nails and peeled the potatoes — four big, dusty potatoes. Her hair tickled her face and neck, her nose itched and the perspiration rolled down her face.

“Oh, dear,” she groaned in exasperation, “I wish I didn’t have to cook on such a hot, hot day!” Then she built the fire in the cook stove again and filled the tea kettle out at the pump, pumping the water with angry, impatient pulls of the creaking handle.

“It’s getting meals the whole time,” she declared gloomily, as she wiped her hands on the kitchen towel. “Now, William T.,” she directed, “I’m going upstairs to get cleaned up. If anything boils over, come and call me. I’ll be down in a minute. Don’t go away and don’t get into anything.”

Up in the little room under the sloping walls it



was stuffily hot. Ardena brushed her hair back into a knot on her neck and put on the white dress, stretching her arms in a painful attempt to locate the buttons down the back. When she came downstairs, the steam was rising from the potatoes on the stove. William T. sat in a round, silent little heap out on the doorstep. Ardena brought a fresh tablecloth from the pantry and spread it on the table.

"Say, Ardena, my birthday's Tuesday, isn't it?" William T.'s fat cheeks were flattened against the rusty screen door.

"I guess it is," Ardena responded absently, as she cut the bread.

"I'm six years old, ain't I?"

"Yes," Ardena's voice came from the pantry. "And plenty old enough to remember not to say 'ain't.'"

"When Budge was six years old, his mother invited the minister there to supper."

"Is that so? You run and tell father dinner's ready. He's around at the side of the house, reading. And then go over to the Slocums' and call Alonzo. Run along and dinner will be ready by the time you are back."

"My, my, my, but this is hot weather!" Mr. Marsh, spare and nervous, closed the loose screen



securely after him. "It is amazing how hot weather does hold on. Where's Alonzo and William T.? Hot weather makes us as hungry as cold weather, too. That's right — cold meat," as he scanned the table. "It's too hot for you to stand over a stove and do much cooking to-day. Better manage to save yourself as much work as you can during this sultry spell."

A sudden rush on the doorstep, a wrench at the screen door and Alonzo followed by William T. came into the room.

"Oh, Alonzo, how dirty you look!" With frowning disapproval Ardena surveyed the hot, breathless, red-faced, tumbled-haired Alonzo before her.

"Yes, yes," Mr. Marsh stopped his chair halfway in the slide to the table. "I have meant to speak to you about being more careful of your appearance on Sundays, Alonzo. I'm going down to Doc Stubbs's after dinner to read 'Dooley' with the doctor, but I want you to clean up and stay at home. Running about on Sundays is a bad habit to get into. You used to attend Sabbath school with regularity."

"My foot isn't quite well enough for my shoes yet," Alonzo explained, as he assiduously flattened the bushiness of his hair with the palms of his hands.



“Budge and me — we go to Sunday school,” and William T. erected his knife and fork on the tablecloth anticipatory of the coming plateful.

Mr. Marsh served, Ardena ran for the forgotten pepper and salt and Alonzo and William T. ate in silence.

“When Budge was six years old, his mother invited the minister there to supper.” William T. had forgotten the half-consumed beans and potatoes.

But Mr. Marsh was enjoying the comforts of white shirt sleeves and cold meat and plenty of leisure. Ardena had gone to the pantry for more bread and Alonzo applied himself to the plateful before him, carefully concealing the grimy palms of his hands in the process of manipulating his knife and fork.

“I like the minister,” William T.’s voice continued pleasantly. “He’s nice and Budge said when he was six years old his mother invited the minister over to supper. And Budge told me that we haven’t had the minister at our house yet. And — and — and he said, ‘Why don’t you ever invite him to your house — why don’t you invite him on your birthday?’ and — and so I did.”

Ardena set the glass of water, already halfway



to her lips, back on the table again. "William T., what are you talking about?"

"Budge said 'twas polite. He told me to tell the minister you told him to come 'cause that made it politer. Budge's mother let him invite the minister himself and that's how Budge knew how to do it. It's my sixth birthday, too," William T. doggedly defended himself.

"But he won't come?" Ardena questioned quickly.

"Yes, he will too," William T. joyfully contradicted, his big eyes swelling round with earnestness. "I asked him just like Budge told me to and he said delighted, he'd come."

With suspended fork Ardena looked speechlessly at William T., while Alonzo fell back in his chair in repeated snickers of amusement. Mr. Marsh glanced up, his mild gray eyes contracting in mirth. "I'm afraid that you are fated to be hostess to the Reverend Doctor John Calvin Bell, Ardena."

"Oh," Ardena groaned, "William T., I know you're only fooling."

William T.'s round, serious eyes were in themselves a complete contradiction. "Budge wasn't fooling. The minister came all right. He's nice, too; he says, 'Delighted, I'll come.'"



Ardena, desperate, looked from the guilty William T. to the snickering Alonzo, and then at her father in his enjoyment of a third cup of tea. "Oh," she burst out, "but he's Carlton's father and he's so dreadfully nice and particular and so — so imposing and so — oh, so cultured and scholarly! I can't endure it. Why, father, he'll think we're — we're just regular heathens. I've always stood in awe of him. I can't do it — I just can't — can't — can't. I've never hardly dared to speak to him."

"Jiminy, but I'll bet I'll skin!" Alonzo was digging the last slice of apple sauce from his dish. "I hope he doesn't forget his specks. When he doesn't wear them he always looks as if he were hunting them."

"Alonzo," Mr. Marsh said rather sharply, as he turned his attention in that direction, "I do not like the disrespectful manner in which you have been speaking of people lately and I do not like your careless table manners. We really need to have company once in awhile to help you mend your ways. If William T. has invited Mr. Bell, Ardena, and he has accepted, as seems to be the case, I see nothing to do but to extend the invitation ourselves and to accept the situation gracefully. Our accommodations are not such just now as render entertaining a



complete pleasure, and I would not have had the courage to ask Mr. Bell myself, but in the present circumstances it seems to me advisable to carry the supper through in the best way that we can."

Ardena's face lengthened in hopeless resignation. "I suppose I'll have to. But these dreadful iron-stone dishes, the rag carpets and the one old rocking chair. *I'll die, if he doesn't.*"

Mr. Marsh pushed his chair with deliberation from the table and brushed the crumbs from his vest. "Do the best that you can, child. Some day we'll have things more as we want them, I hope. I think I'll go down to Doc Stubbs's for a little while," he said quietly as he rose.

A little later, through the pantry window, Ardena saw her father going down the heat-whitened street, his shiny cutaway and old straw hat made prominent by the glaring sunlight. A feeling of rebellion against everything, but most particularly heat and poverty and weariness and small brothers, surged through her.

"Say, Dena," William T. was swinging on the kitchen door, "I can go over to Budge's, can't I? His mother's going to let us cut pictures and paste them in a book this afternoon."



"You may go for a little while. But, oh, William T., how could you —"

William T., in a short space of time, had noiselessly opened the screen door, slipped out and disappeared.

Ardena cleared the table, washed the dishes and swept the floor. When she had finished, she took a palm-leaf fan and went out on the back doorstep. She brushed the thick hair from her face, wiped the perspiration away and fanned. Beyond the shadow of the house, but a short distance away, stretched a yard of tangled, sunburned grass with a scrawny box-elder down by the fence. At the other side of the lopsided woodshed was the weed-grown garden-patch with its onion and lettuce tops gone to seed. Across the loose boardwalk some straggling sun-flowers drooped their withered heads and the cucumber vine twisting up the clothes-line post had shrivelled and dried in the burning sun. After awhile Ardena jumped up and went around the house and through the gate to Mrs. Shute's house. Here the grass was fresh and green since it was protected by the shade of well-kept trees and was sprinkled every evening. To the back stretched neat beds of thriving vegetables and the fence and walk



were lined with trim currant and raspberry bushes and vines of purpling grapes. Along the side of the house were little beds of flourishing marigolds, pansies, verbenas and sweet peas. Against the house tall hollyhocks swept their gay blossoms while a giant oak branched its cool shade over the back porch.

"Good afternoon, Ardena. Come right on in and sit down." Mrs. Shute's cordial voice came from the side porch behind a screen of woodbine.

"How nice and cool!" Ardena seated herself in the low rocker and breathed a sigh of content. She looked about at the shaded retreat with the braided mat at the doorstep and Mrs. Shute starched and immaculate in black and white calico. "How pretty your new dress is! It looks so fresh and clean."

"It does all right for a home dress. I wanted dimity, but I finally decided I'd better get calico again. Dimity does split soon and I knew if it gave out in a couple of summers that Ebenezer'd think that I was going through things pretty fast. He doesn't seem to be feeling very well this hot weather and I guess little things irritate him more than usual."

"And it's so cool here. I nearly roasted over in



our old oven." Ardena was too happy in being cool to give much heed to the growing eccentricities of Mr. Shute.

"I think this is cool, too. But Ebenezer seems to have a real hard day of it. He's been trying this porch and the front one all day and I guess he's finally decided on the front one, for I haven't seen him for about an hour now. How are all of you this hot day?"

"Oh, Mrs. Shute," Ardena stopped the rocker in its backward swing, her face clouded by the sweep of recollections, "I never was in so much trouble — never, never, never! William T.'s invited the minister to supper Tuesday night."

"Well, he's coming, isn't he?" Mrs. Shute still reclined in her chair, her arms folded comfortably.

"Mrs. Shute," Ardena's tone showed both surprise and impatience, "I'm sure I'm not thinking about that part of it! If you had just old iron-stone china and glasses every one different and silverware with the silver all worn off and no refrigerator to keep things cool, you wouldn't care to entertain such an educated, distinguished, fastidious person as Reverend Bell, yourself. And then, besides, he's Carlton's father. And Carlton's in my class at school."



"I don't know the Bells myself very well but I hear they are very nice people. Don't go around thinking that you aren't as good as somebody else because then you probably aren't."

"But, Mrs. Shute, we haven't had any company but the folks from the country for years and years — since before mother was sick. We aren't used to it."

"Then get used to it. Alonzo and William T. ought to become used to society ways. And get every one you can to come to your house that you like and make them feel welcome or the time will come when the boys are grown that you'll feel sorry. I always liked company real well myself, but Ebenezer's always made a fuss about the extra kerosene and wood going to waste in the parlor. He's considerable older than I am and I have to make allowances."

"I know," Ardena acknowledged. "But, oh, to begin with the minister — and Mr. Bell! Why, I've never hardly spoken to him."

"That's just where to begin; you'll be sure you're starting right then. Anyway, you ought to give William T. his choice when it comes his turn."

Ardena's chair swayed back and forth and then stopped short. "I'll agree to all that you've said,





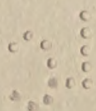


you'd need help. It's too hot for grandmother to get in and Logan's pretty busy in the field, so I left the children with their grandmother and hitched up and came in myself. It's rather warm for a party, isn't it, Ardena?"

Ardena told her all about William T.'s self-appointed mission, and Aunt Lib laughed. "Just like a child," she said.

Aunt Lib's buggy contained the party — there were salad eggs and a crock of potato salad and another crock of creamy yellow butter and some home-made pickles and a glass of jelly and some chicken fried all crisp and brown and a basket of luscious peaches and a wonderful big layer cake and a loaf of downy bread. "Hurry the things right down cellar," Aunt Lib called to Ardena, who with the help of the recently arrived Alonzo and William T. was busy taking the things to the house. "It's so hot that we thought we'd better get the things all ready and bring them to you and then you wouldn't need to heat up the cook stove and get your house all warmed up."

"I'll stay until this afternoon," Aunt Lib offered later, as she was taking off her hat. "Then I must do a little trading and hurry home. I want to help you get your table set. Grandmother's been real





worked up about your inviting Reverend Bell and she thought I'd better stay and get things pretty well along. Here's grandmother's best linen set, her tablecloth and napkins that we use only on very special occasions, so tell the boys to be careful. We'll pull out the table here in the sitting room and get it set. I want to see how things are coming out."

Mr. Marsh came home at noon, but the meal consisted of leftovers served from a corner of the kitchen table. Then commenced the table setting and Ardena brought forth all the dishes that the pantry contained — a rather disheartening array of nicked and cracked ironstone. But by Mrs. Shute's coming over at this opportune time they were able, upon insistent urging, to fill in the deficiencies from her well-equipped shelves. Mrs. Shute also contributed the centerpiece in the way of a pretty doily and a big yellow bowl full of crisp, spicy nasturtiums.

By five that evening Aunt Lib had departed and the Marsh family, with the kitchen serving temporarily as bathroom, were scrubbing or being scrubbed and then arraying themselves in the best at their disposal. A new little summer suit that Aunt Lib had brought in as grandmother's remembrance upon this momentous occasion and a new



blue necktie from Aunt Lib had rendered William T. quite properly arrayed as host of the party. Mr. Marsh put on a stiff white shirt and buttoned on his coat and vest in heroic, though smothering, attempt to do honor to the guest. Alonzo's waist was clean, his hands and face shinily scoured, his hair well plastered down and his feet encased in stiffly burning shoes. Alonzo had really warmed up to the event and was commendably anxious to do his part in a creditable manner. Ardena put on her thinnest shirtwaist and a stiff white skirt.

Promptly at six appeared the guest. Alonzo, from an outpost in the corner of the yard, had seen him coming and the family were lined up in readiness to receive him — Mr. Marsh, Ardena, Alonzo and William T., that member of the family to the celebration of whose birthday anniversary the minister had been bidden being quite unconscious of the inferior place in the receiving line he was now occupying. And when the minister finally shook his small hand, expressed his great gratification in being able to help celebrate the day, wished him many happy returns and then put into his outstretched arms a mysterious, store-wrapped package, William T. actually squirmed in overwhelming embarrassment. But the opening of the package, which



proved to be a box of paints, brought so much delight to the recipient that his natural poise was restored and he, really too soon, grew a bit too loquacious so that various frowns from his father and whispers from his sister were necessary restraints to his loosened tongue.

Mr. Bell took the old wooden rocker and, being thoughtfully reminded by Alonzo of its backward swaying tendencies, a possible mishap was averted. Mr. Marsh tried to appear at ease in a straight backed chair and Alonzo and William T. wiggled themselves into as comfortable positions as were possible between the bulging springs of the old carpet lounge. Ardena was busy bringing up the last things from the cellar.

Ardena had spent many anxious minutes during the day in coaching the boys in the various little things she thought of from time to time. They bowed their heads during grace with a reverence that was truly gratifying. Then in the awkward pause that followed, William T., unfortunately, was the first to experience a natural ease.

"The most of these things are ours," pointing with just pride at the well-arranged and well-provisioned table, "but what aren't ours belongs to grandma or Aunt Lib or —"



William T.'s eyes met the menacing frown of the incensed Alonzo. Ardena was nudging him with a nudge that was enough to draw his mind to things purely physical, "and — and —"

Mr. Bell's dignified face was almost — but he struggled — amused. He coughed behind the stiff folds of grandmother's best linen. Then he hastened to say in a very quiet and well-controlled voice, "How very kind it is, William T., of all these good people to help you celebrate your birthday."

"Yes — yes, sir," quickly agreed the now acquitted William T., as he cast a justly innocent glance at the red-faced Alonzo.

Mr. Bell's happy remark broke the ice and the dinner party now continued on less strained and less formal lines. The watchful Ardena just caught William T.'s toppling glass in time to save the minister's freshly pressed summer suit from a drenching, and Alonzo, visibly mortified, flopped a big juicy drumstick right into the center of grandmother's cherished tablecloth. But the meal was delicious and the Reverend Mr. Bell received second helpings with very little urging.

The men enjoyed talking with one another, and Ardena noticed, not without a little glow of pride, that Mr. Bell listened attentively to her father's



political views, to his criticism of books and to the wide range of his magazine reading. When the meal was over, Alonzo and William T., rather weary with much entertaining, departed for the outdoors, William T. making straight for the home of Budge Cracker with his final report. After Ardena had cleared away the table and was washing the dishes in the kitchen the two men, in spite of the warmth radiated from the kerosene lamp, played a game of absorbing and evenly matched chess.

It was late that night when Ardena made her last pilgrimage to Mrs. Shute's. She had purposely waited until after nine. The stars stood out thick and heavy in the blue blackness overhead and the air was cool and refreshing. Slowly and carefully she carried a chair loaded with glasses and dishes through the backyard gate towards the light in the distant kitchen.

"Here I am," she called in a hushed voice.

Mrs. Shute stepped lightly out on the porch and helped Ardena up the steps. "Come right in and sit down and tell me all about it. Ebenezer's off to bed and sound asleep, so we won't disturb him."

Ardena dropped down into the nearest chair, her eyes bright with excitement. "It was just fine, Mrs. Shute! Even Alonzo said so. The table



looked so pretty when I got everything on it and the supper was so good and Mr. Bell was so nice and father was so funny! Mr. Bell's not one speck stuck up. He earned all of his way through college and he told us so many funny college scrapes. And he brought William T. a beautiful box of paints — Mrs. Bell sent them. Even Alonzo liked Mr. Bell — I could see he did. I'm so glad, for I was afraid Alonzo was changing. He used to be so nice and lately he's been getting smart. I hope Mr. Bell keeps a hold on him and gets him interested in Sunday school again. I mean to tell him to. And father was a fine entertainer — I was so proud of him!

“He told some of his stories and then they talked books and then they played chess. Father was beaten, too, and he was so surprised that he asked Mr. Bell to play with him often. Of course some things went wrong; but then father turned each mishap off with some witty remark. Do you know, Mrs. Shute,” Ardena said thoughtfully, “I'm going to do as you say and have more company. We haven't nice furniture but if we're hospitable that's the main thing.”

Mrs. Shute nodded instant approval. “That's



right, Ardena. That's just right. You don't have to wait for fine linen and silver before beginning your entertaining. Hospitality and ironstone can make your company have a good time."



## CHAPTER VII

### CHRISTMAS AGAIN

Christmas was coming again. Ardena was learning to dread Christmas. Christmases seemed to mean, most of all, cold weather, extra fuel and clothing, diminished family funds, big expectations on the part of the boys and much worrying and planning for herself and her father. But Christmases come. And now another was fast drawing very near.

This was the second Christmas without the mother. The first had passed off better than Ardena had anticipated. From a very slender fund given to her by her father Ardena had managed to buy a few trinkets for the boys, she and her father, by silent agreement, having planned to omit gifts to one another. But they had all gone out to the farm for the Christmas Eve tree and the Christmas Day dinner, slipping along the frozen roads in Uncle Logan's big, bumpy bob-sled. The Christmas tree consisted mostly of ornaments and the ornaments were home-made strings of popcorn and cranber-



ries. But no king of the realm had feasted on a more sumptuous dinner than the one that grandmother and Aunt Lib had prepared. So that Christmas season, with much satisfaction to Alonzo and much joy to William T., had slipped past.

And now another was coming. This Christmas, too, seemed destined to be the most troublesome Christmas that Ardena had yet known.

In the first place the Marsh family could not go out to the farm because Aunt Lib's children were all down with the measles. Also, grandmother could not come in to see them for the day, since she was only just recovering from a severe cold that had left her weak and coughing. As the time drew near Ardena learned that she could not even count upon Mrs. Shute for advice and help. Mr. Shute, who had been in failing health during the autumn, was now not expected to live from day to day.

Was there ever a more doleful outlook for a Merry Christmas? It is little wonder that Ardena felt her heart sink within her as the day drew near. But she decided to make a great effort to have the day as much of a success as she could, for Alonzo and William T., in spite of these rather disheartening events, were, nevertheless, eagerly awaiting the event. Ardena told her father to invite Doc Stubbs



in for dinner and she planned the meal with extra care. Her father gave her the sum of two dollars for presents for the boys and this meager amount Ardena tried to stretch sufficiently to include a few of the many and sundry demands that the longings of Alonzo and William T. imposed upon it.

Ardena's own Christmas promised better entertainment than that of the boys, the sophomore class having been invited to the beautiful home of Adelbert Hastings for a Christmas night party. Ardena had a new dress that grandmother had made over from one of her mother's and she had a new cloak that had been bought when the price had been reduced and she had a new cap and Carlton Bell was going to take her. Ardena was counting the very minutes up to the time of really going. Feeling a little conscience-stricken when she recollected that her good time might be better than that of her brothers she dutifully gave the most of the week before Christmas towards getting ready for the boys' holiday.

She washed (with the help of her father and Alonzo and the too helpful William T.) and she ironed, she swept and she dusted, she cooked and she baked and she mended, she patched and she darned. It is true that the icy upstairs rooms received the



proverbial lick-and-promise cleaning and that the patches and darns were rather hastily drawn together bunches. But, after a fashion and with the best of intentions, Ardena did it all.

Cold weather came on just before Christmas — a gray and snowy cold. Then, on Christmas Eve, came a blizzard; the real white, howling, blinding Iowa blizzard. The wind shook the loose doors and windows of the old house and piled them full of sifting snow. The cold crept out from the corners of the sitting room and pressed close against the florid surface of the crackling Round Oak stove.

On Christmas Eve was the celebration at the church and Ardena had counted much on this event as a means of entertaining the children. They always enjoyed the huge Christmas tree (and this year that would be their only tree) and the bag of candy and nuts and the orange they received from the hands of a big and facetious Santa. Santa Claus, even with Alonzo, had never failed to bring forth most pleasurable emotions. As the white, whirling afternoon darkened into night Ardena still kept up hope. William T. talked incessantly of the great treat that was in store for him, for he confidently expected to attend the exercises.



About six Mr. Marsh and Alonzo came in, white with snow and panting for breath. Ardena brushed the snow from them with the broom and helped them take off their wraps. Mr. Marsh, solicitous about Alonzo, had helped him deliver his papers. Both were tired and cold and sat quietly with their feet in the oven, drying and warming. Ardena had drawn the table up near the stove and had a steaming supper and hot cocoa ready for them. With their backs shivering and their feet drawn up on the rounds of the old kitchen chairs the family began supper while the wind howled around the kitchen and the flying snow clicked sharply against the window-panes.

"When we going to start, Dena?" William T. asked presently, having drained to the last drop his second and last cup of cocoa.

"The children had better abandon the thought of going to the church to-night," Mr. Marsh answered. "You don't want to go out in the storm again, do you, Alonzo?"

But Alonzo, while not excitedly insistent, nevertheless manifested his willingness to weather the storm a second time. "'Tisn't Christmas Eve if you just stay at home and don't do anything," he summarized.



Ardena looked at her father. "It isn't very far," she suggested.

Mr. Marsh frowned — a rather weary and resigned frown. "Well, well," he said briefly, "maybe I can get them there. I wouldn't think of letting you go alone with them in such a storm, Ardena. I would be worried unless I were along. Maybe I'd better go on over first and see whether they intend having the exercises or not. It's a little hard to plan —"

Just then the kitchen door was wrenched open and in a whirl of pelting, blinding snowflakes little Mrs. Shute was blown into the room.

"I can't sit," she breathlessly explained, after Mr. Marsh had forced the door shut behind her and was offering her a chair near the stove. "No, keep your seat, Mr. Marsh, and all of you go right on with your eating. I'm real upset," as she drew another breath, "and I don't know what is best to be done. Mrs. Guffy says that she'll have to get off for some rest and some sleep. She needs it, too, for she's getting old and can't keep up with a long siege of nursing as she once could. And I sort of think Doc Stubbs had better come up. He's suffering considerable again. I wish now that Ebenezer hadn't been so set against telephones. They're real handy



at a time like this. But there, I don't mean to say a word that sounds like complaining. I — I —" She was such a tired-out, weary-eyed, pathetic-looking little figure.

"I'll go down for the doctor at once," Mr. Marsh said quickly. "I'll spend the night with Mr. Shute and give you and the nurse the rest that you need. We are glad to do all that we can for you, I am sure. Do as much as we can we will still be your debtors."

And thus it came about that the Christmas Eve project was abandoned. Ardena and Alonzo and even William T. left alone on Christmas Eve with nothing to do other than washing the dishes and keeping the fires going and getting ready for bed talked of things other than Christmas trees and boxes of candy. Just once William T. with his round face very long and serious mentioned something about Christmas trees in general but was silenced even then by Alonzo who exclaimed rather gruffly, "Say, you make me tired, William T.! Can't you learn to brace up and take a thing when you have to? I'd like to know who knit you your last pair of mittens, anyway?"

The next morning was cold. Boo, but it was cold! It was a creaking, snapping, biting, sneaking



cold. Mr. Marsh had come in from the Shute's about six o'clock and had the fires burning up brightly. Alonzo and William T. crept downstairs in their nightgowns and dressed by the sitting room fire and Ardena came hurrying down with shoes unlaced and dress unbuttoned and comb and hairpins in her hand. Mr. Marsh announced that the thermometer registered twelve below at six when he came in. And in mockery of it all the sun shone down in dazzling brightness on the billows of spotless and glistening snow.

Ardena had fixed up the sitting room table in a festive way on the preceding evening and the boys were delighted with the sight that now greeted them. She had bought some holly and red tissue paper by way of decoration and had draped these around the red wool stand-cover. The few presents lay in the middle. There wasn't much — a pencil box and knife for Alonzo and a hammer and a game for William T. Then there were some useful presents from grandmother in the way of stockings and mufflers and caps. Ardena had filled some carefully saved candy boxes with popcorn and fudge. Alonzo had taken from his money earned by carrying papers enough to purchase for Ardena a wooden stocking darning, for his father a tie pin and for



William T. a tin goat on wheels. For Alonzo's first venture in Christmas shopping each recipient showed appropriate and commendable appreciation.

"Mrs. Shute sent over this bundle," Mr. Marsh remarked, pausing long enough while taking out the ashes to point to a chair. "She said that she picked the things up on the fly while she was downtown a week ago."

The package contained a box of handkerchiefs — good linen ones, too. Three for each member of the Marsh family, big and little.

"Oh!" exclaimed Ardena. Then she added, "She never forgets us. How is Mr. Shute?"

"He can't last over twenty-four hours longer," her father answered her in a low voice. "He is suffering, too. I'll be there the most of the day. He's so eccentric that he will allow only a certain few around him. And Doc told me to tell you that he's sorry but he can't be here for dinner. He has a call from the country and with such roads as there are now the trip will take him the most of the day. Says he intended buying you children some presents but he has been so busy that he forgot it. Gave me five dollars this morning for you. I can buy some books with it for you children."



"William T. needs a new overcoat pretty badly," Ardena suggested. "I can scarcely get him inside of his old one."

It was a long, lonesome, monotonous day for the Marsh children. After breakfast the family took baths in the kitchen, heated to the point of suffocation, and arrayed themselves in their best in proper observance of the day. Mr. Marsh took a nap, went downtown and then over to the Shute's. Alonzo whittled with his new knife until he broke a blade, expressed his opinion of a woman's selection of a jackknife and turned his attention to the last piece of fudge in his box of candy. William T. pounded nails in a board until his chubby thumb received the mighty stroke intended for the refractory nail and then came to Ardena, busy singeing the chicken over the glowing coals, for repairs and consolation. Ardena showed the boys how to play the new game and this amusement kept them busy while she completed the dinner.

Ardena prepared the dinner with the greatest of care. She put on a fresh tablecloth and got down the few best pieces of china and glassware from the top shelf in the cupboard. The smell of the chicken and coffee made the big, sunny kitchen fragrant with their aroma and the boys hovered expectantly about



the stove. But the things were overdone and getting dry when Mr. Marsh hurried into the kitchen.

"I'm very sorry, Ardena," Mr. Marsh apologized, as they all drew their chairs up to the table, "but I was unavoidably detained at the office and also at Mrs. Shute's house. This is a fine dinner." But although appreciating the kindness of the remark Ardena felt the cook's keen disappointment in the delayed serving of the ready and waiting meal.

Ardena let the boys prepare a basket of things for Mrs. Shute, and they carried it over between them. But they returned with rather dampened ardor. Mrs. Shute was asleep and they couldn't even have a visit with this much liked little neighbor. It was three o'clock when the dishes were finally washed and dried and put away. Then until it was five Ardena read to the boys some of the Uncle Remus stories. The story about the Tar Baby brought forth the usual amount of mirthful appreciation and Ardena heard them laugh out in good fun for the first time that day. At six Mr. Marsh came in again for a hasty lunch.

"I'm sorry, Ardena," he said, as he rose from the table, "but I can't be here to-night. I must go on down to the drug store. Doc hasn't come back yet and I'd better not leave until he comes. The nurse



will be on duty again to-night and I'll try to get in about ten."

"But, father," Ardena said, "you know our class party is to-night at the Hastings' and Carlton is coming for me. Yet I don't want to leave the boys alone. They've had a long, lonesome day of it. Do you think you had better stop in and tell Carlton on your way downtown that I can't go?"

"Guess I can look after things. I'm no baby." Alonzo's tone was full of forced and scornful bravado but his usually expressive face was stolid and impassive. William T.'s round face expressed nothing at all. He was undoubtedly accepting the dictates of fortune in a perfectly apathetic manner.

"Well, well, Ardena, maybe you'd better let Alonzo take care of William T. this evening. I'll try to run over soon after eight and see that they get into bed. You don't go to many parties. And the Hastings' home is a pleasant one to be invited to. It will do you good to go. And you'd better not disappoint Carlton Bell this late in the day."

Ardena dressed for the party in her frozen-up little room beneath the sloping, frosty roof of the house. It was so cold that her hands ached as she combed her hair and she shifted from one foot to the other as she put on her dress. But in spite of her



hasty toilet Ardena looked pretty as she came down into the sitting room to black her shoes in order that their everyday, worn appearance might assume a more dressed-up look. She wore the soft gray dress that grandmother had made from one that had belonged to her mother and its only trimming was tucks and shirring. But with her bright red hair puffed out about her face she made a pleasing picture. Even Alonzo who sat idly on the edge of the old carpet lounge with his hands thrust deep down into his trousers pockets continued to look at her after a first hasty glance. William T., quite delighted, ran his sticky little hands in loving admiration over the folds of this very best dress. Ardena made no objections. She was thinking. Two very sober little faces kept Ardena busily thinking.

Carlton came over early for Ardena. "Mighty cold outside," he said as he was ushered into the room by the hospitable William T. "Believe it's warming up a little, though. Well, William T., how are you?" he asked, as he unbuttoned his big overcoat.

William T. wiggled.

"Had a Merry Christmas?"

William T. drew a long breath. Then he commenced. "It — it —" Then he commenced again.



"Grandmother couldn't come in 'cause it was so cold and all Aunt Lib's children got the measles and Mr. Shute's very sick and dying and father stays over there and Doc Stubbs had to go out in the country." In this one long breath William T. had fully explained the situation. Then, on catching a scowl from Alonzo, "Ye — e — es, sir, we — we had a Merry Christmas. Only," wiggling in big squirms around his chair, "we didn't get to see the Christmas tree at the church, either." William T. wasn't looking in Alonzo's direction.

"Father thought we'd better stay at home last night and keep the fires going." Alonzo was making haste to give his version of the day. "Hasn't been anything wrong with this Christmas."

"Father has been over to the Shutes', helping the most of the day. We usually go out to the farm and have a big tree and dinner together. So I think that the boys really haven't had a very happy day. But they've been mighty good about making the best of it. Mr. Shute isn't expected to last through the night and father is over there now. Really, Carlton, I think I'd better stay at home this evening. I'm sorry to disappoint you right here at the last — and the party will be lots of fun, I know, but — no, I'm not going, and that ends it."



"Aw, go on, Ardena," said Alonzo, looking steadily down at the worn toe of his shoe. "Guess I know enough to put a stick of wood in the stove. William T.'s got to go to bed right away, anyway."

"I don't either have to go right away, so there." William T. was casting a pouting glance at Alonzo. "On Christmas nights I never go to bed early."

"Say, Ardena," spoke up Carlton, "let's take the youngsters along. Like to know why not. Going to have a Christmas farce with a Christmas tree in it and all sorts of fun. They'll enjoy it. I know Mrs. Hastings well and it will be all right with her."

"Thank you, Carlton," Ardena spoke with some dignity, "but I can't take them where they aren't invited. It's been a lonely, disappointing old day from start to finish. But I'd just hate myself when I got there and thought of the boys here alone. They've been regular little bricks all day and I'll stand by them just as well as they've stood by me. I don't like Christmas — I never have liked Christmas — and I never will like Christmas, so there!" Ardena's cheeks glowed a deep red. "But, oh, dear me," as she beheld Carlton's embarrassed flush and the startled faces of the two boys, "what am I saying! We'll call this Christmas just a great big fizzle and next Christmas we'll have twice as much fun



to make up, won't we, William T.?" Ardena was forcing a smile to her lips. "I hope you have a fine time at the party and the farce goes off well, Carlton. I'll be anxious to hear about it all." Ardena was winking pretty hard. "William T., you get the checker board out and Ardena'll show you how to play checkers. You've been wanting to learn. Let's see if you and I can beat Alonzo."

"Say, Ardena," said Carlton again, as he rose to go, "I know it would be all right if you all went, considering the circumstances, and Mrs. Hastings would want you to. But — well, so long. It's as you say. All those in the farce are expected to get there early for there's always lots to be done at the last. That's a mighty fine tin goat, William T. What you feeding him — tin cans?"

It was about a half hour later when Alonzo and William T. and Ardena, sitting very close to the fire, were intent upon the momentous movements of their crowned heads that a knock sounded on the front door. Almost upsetting the board in his precipitate haste William T. flew to open the door.

"Good evening, Mish Marsh."

The big, overcoated figure who had stepped into the room was Mr. Jackson. Ardena quite gasped.

"I have been sent over with some messages," he



said, smiling as he handed her an envelope. He unbuttoned his overcoat and sat down in the chair that Alonzo had thoughtfully set forward for him.

There were three notes addressed to Ardena, one to Alonzo and one to William T. The first note that Ardena opened was from Mrs. Hastings. It was a most cordial invitation for Ardena to come and bring her two brothers. Another note was from Miss Miller and she said that every member of the sophomore class was present except Ardena and that the class sent a special invitation for her to come and bring the boys. Since Carlton was busy getting ready for the play, she had sent Mr. Jackson over for them and she hoped that Ardena would not disappoint him. A third note was from Annabel Dilly. Alonzo's note was from Carlton who sent a hurry-up call for him to come over and help them as a boy to run errands and help stage the play was badly needed. With the help of Mr. Jackson William T. was slowly but steadily deciphering his own note. It was from both Gladys and Gertrude Hastings asking William T. to come and play with them that evening. They wanted some guests of their own age very badly and their mother had told them that they could invite William T. Could he please hurry and come right away?



"I know Gladys and Gertrude," William T. was proudly explaining. "Gladys is in the room below me and Gertrude is in the room above me. They're nice."

"Well," exclaimed Alonzo, in his most important tone of voice, "I think I'll hurry over there just as soon as I can! They're probably waiting for me now. Must I black my shoes again, Ardena? And is my tie on straight?"

With Mr. Jackson's help Ardena soon had the boys ready. Mr. Jackson assisted Alonzo into his new, plenty-large-enough overcoat and Ardena squeezed William T.'s fat little person into his little old overcoat and finally succeeded in twisting the buttons into the buttonholes. After scribbling a note to her father, which she left leaning against the lamp, she turned the light low, shut the stove up tight and they all set off for the party.

With William T.'s fat little hand in his Mr. Jackson led the way and was the friendliest and happiest of escorts. Alonzo insisted upon making all possible haste, and so they were soon approaching the brightly lighted home of the Hastings. As they went up the well-shovelled path to the large front porch Ardena began to feel a bit dubious. Taking small brothers to class parties was something of a



departure. The boys tiptoed up the steps to the porch like a couple of mice. Mr. Jackson opened the door and they stepped into a place that seemed all light and laughing and talking. Gladys had opened the door for them — Gladys all pink and white with a huge bristling bow rising erect from her bobbed head and two very big blue eyes taking in William T. from head to foot. Ardena began to feel quite embarrassed. And then Mrs. Hastings, large and hospitable, came and shook hands cordially with them all, and Miss Miller, in blue, greeted them and Annabel Dilly came up and said how glad she was to see them there. Then Carlton came and took Alonzo away as soon as he could take off his wraps, and Gladys, reinforced by Gertrude, just a little bigger pink and white creation, came and took William T. off upstairs to the playroom.

The Marsh children spent a most delightful Christmas evening in the Hastings home. Ardena caught glimpses of Alonzo hurrying hither and thither and heard occasional rings of childish laughter floating down the stairs. During the performance of the Christmas farce William T., between two very erect and bristling pink bows on the front row of seats, was seen fathering a family of dolls. Whispered calls for Alonzo were heard at frequent



intervals and he was seen helping in all sorts of ways. Ardena, seated between Miss Miller and Anabel Dilly, was too happy for words. Later in the evening Alonzo came to tell Ardena that he was going to help Mrs. Hastings in the kitchen, and during the serving of the refreshments William T. was entrusted with the passing of the nuts.

In leaving, Mrs. Hastings graciously expressed her great indebtedness to Alonzo and asked Ardena to bring the boys and come over as often as she could. William T. received gratifying requests to visit the playroom very soon again. Carlton Bell took them home, but it was so icy cold outside that they couldn't draw long enough breaths to do much talking. In parting with Carlton they all three made it very clear in a very few sentences that they had all had a very Merry Christmas.

But later, when Ardena was peeling off William T.'s tight little coat from his round, warm little person, Alonzo said, "Say, Ardena, I don't know how Mrs. Hastings could have managed without me. I'm mighty glad I was there to help out."

And William T. sleepily added, "And Gertrude and Gladys are nice. They always remember to say 'thank you' and 'please' to their father and mother. I got to have another birthday party,



Dena, and this time I'm going to invite Gertrude and Gladys."

Later Ardena, telling her father all about it, concluded, "I'm glad they got to go. It made a Christmas for them. But that isn't all. Do you know, father, that I'm so proud of Alonzo! He imitates older people quickly and in a little while he was talking in that quiet, gracious manner that makes Mrs. Hastings so charming. And William T. needs to play with well-mannered little girls like the Hastings children, too. I'm going to keep the boys more with me and be more careful of their manners. I'm so sorry for Mrs. Shute. But I'm glad that the boys could have a little Christmas fun. They've been mighty good the whole day and they deserved a good time."



## CHAPTER VIII

### HOUSEWORK AND READING

To her second-year class in English literature Miss Miller, on the Monday that succeeded the holidays, strongly urged the formation of the habit early in life of consecutive and systematic reading of the best books. She said that she intended to adopt a new plan for the class work during January. From a list of sixty books which she would dictate she would ask each member of the class to read at least one a week, and on Friday there would be a discussion of the contents of these books. Each member was to make a brief report of the book read and to summarize in a few words his impression of it. If more than one book was read, there would be recognition of this fact in making up the class grade for the month. Then Miss Miller, in blue, looking again at the list, was moved to speak further. She said that there was not a book on the list the contents of which any member of the class could afford to remain in ignorance. She added that she



hoped that each, voluntarily, would read as many of the books on the list as was possible. In selecting the books, to be sure, they were to choose those with which they were not yet familiar.

Ardena hurried straight home after school — that is, she hurried as fast as two very worn and slippery rubbers and a very hard-packed, snowy sidewalk would let her. She was trying, all the way, to think where she had last seen her library card. Arriving home she straightway began to search; and she looked under all of the things stacked up on the sitting room table and she looked through the what-not filled with books and she looked upstairs around her bureau and then she looked downstairs again around the machine. She located it, at last, clear down in the heaped-up mending basket under a lost stocking of William T.'s. Then Ardena again buttoned up her coat, pulled on her worn-out gloves and departed for downtown and the library. When she arrived inside the rather hot and stuffy little upstairs room which was the beginning of the Arcadia free public library, she found, lined up in front of the librarian's desk, Annabel Dilly and Carlton Bell and Adelbert Hastings and Reuben Green and Eliakim Meeker and Leta Lindsey.

“How many do you think you can read?” Anna-



bel asked her in a whisper as she passed her with a book under her arm.

"Well, I don't know," Ardena answered. "You know I don't have very much time to read with so much to see to at home. How many can you?"

"I have to help at home a good deal, too, but I'm going to read as many as I possibly can. Of course I ought to become acquainted with the books on the list that I haven't already read and then, also, you know that Miss Miller wishes us to read as many as we possibly can. What are you going to start with?" to Leta, standing ahead of Ardena.

"'The Man Without a Country.' I thought I'd start with a short one and Carlton said this was short. Oh, yes, indeed, I intend to read more than the required four. Why, Miss Miller has asked us as a personal favor to read as many as we can and we all want to do what will please Miss Miller. I'll wait, Ardena, and walk home with you."

After leaving Leta at the street corner Ardena hurried on home as fast as she could. She must iron a waist for William T. to put on in the morning, before she started supper. But maybe she could read the first chapter. That would make a good beginning. So, on arriving home, she put some wood in the kitchen stove and pushed the irons to the



front. Then she sat down on the edge of a chair near the stove and put her feet in the oven. It was six when Ardena finally glanced up from her book. William T. had come in from sliding down hill with Budge Cracker and was expressing, in wide-eyed reproof, his surprise at the lack of supper-getting preparations evident before him. Ardena slammed the book shut, caught up her blue kitchen apron hung from a convenient nail, swung her arms into the big armholes, picked up a pan and descended to the cellar for potatoes.

Haste surely made waste with the getting of the supper. The potatoes boiled dry and the eggs, while being poached, stuck exasperatingly to the bottom of the pan and the supply of bread she found to be below her expectations.

"Well," said Mr. Marsh, newspaper in hand, as the family finally encircled the dining-table, "I'm afraid that your book got the better of you. What are you reading?"

"'Lorna Doone,'" answered Ardena, pouring tea for her father from a teapot with a broken spout. "Miss Miller wishes us to do outside reading this month."

"That is a very good idea, Ardena," as he turned the page of the newspaper, "a most excellent idea.



You aren't reading as extensively as I did at your age. Only by steadily keeping at it from youth to old age can one begin to keep pace with the wealth of good reading that surrounds one. Observe Blackmore's style while reading that book."

"I never seem to get the time to read very long books," Ardena replied, as she spread a slice of bread and butter for William T. "But of course I'd do anything that I possibly could to please Miss Miller. She has asked us to spend this month reading all of the books that we can. She's immensely proud of our English literature class and so we all want to do all we can to please her. I think I can read one big book or two small ones a week. I read rapidly. I want to keep even with Annabel and Carlton. Miss Miller said that January is an extra fine reading month because of the long evenings."

School mornings were busy mornings for Ardena. There was always William T. to wash and dress and a final inspection to be made of Alonzo's neck and ears. Then she tried to get the breakfast dishes washed and the sitting room straightened up a little before she set off for school at the very last moment. The next morning, dismayed, she realized that she had forgotten to iron William T.'s waist. With a hasty dash she smoothed off with a few strokes of



a barely warm iron a red-spotted waist that she pulled from the clothes basket bulging with clothes waiting to be ironed. Not without some remarks of disapproval on the part of William T. was she able to button him into it, to tie a limp red necktie about his neck, twist him into his little old coat (William T.'s new one was being saved for very best), pull his stocking cap down over his fat cheeks, put on one mitten and advise putting the other hand in his pocket until the missing mitten came to light, place a battered second reader under his arm and hurry him off.

At noontime both Mr. Marsh and Alonzo always hurried home as quickly as possible and assisted Ardena in getting the lunch. At noon on this particular day William T. arrived home very long in the face and much grieved in manner.

"You didn't iron out my waist with a hot enough iron, Dena," he accused his big sister. "Budge — he said it looked funny and Budge's mother — she said you didn't iron it out with a hot enough iron. I like ironed out waists — I do. Grandma always irons out my waists nice and slippery — she does. I'm going to show my waist to Mrs. Shute — I am."

But this being the busy noon hour William T.'s



complaints and forewarnings went unnoticed. "Don't bother," was all the consolation he received from Ardena, busy pouring glasses of milk. "Maybe I can do it to-night." Mr. Marsh, with another appeal to William T. to eliminate a few of the unnecessary pronouns that seemed prone to encumber his speech in spite of innumerable corrections, swung him up into his high chair and tied on his napkin. Alonzo was already eating, there being no time for formalities in the serving and the eating of this school-day noon lunch.

That evening when she returned from school, Ardena found, sitting on her kitchen table, a basket of clothes that were ironed in the smoothest and glossiest of fashions. Ardena frowned, and grew red in the face.

Near the close of the week Ardena returned "Lorna Doone" and brought home "Kenilworth." On Saturday evening it was the established custom in the Marsh family for the kitchen to be heated, the boiler put on, the washtub brought in and for the family to take baths. On Sunday morning they put on their clean clothing. During the preceding week Ardena had not found time to do the family mending.

"Well, just look at this, will you!" Alonzo ex-



claimed in a disgusted tone of voice, as he came out in the kitchen on Sunday morning. "Great big hole in the knee of my stocking and my underwear showing through! Wish grandma could get in here to see us. You don't find grandma sitting around reading all the time."

"I can't help it," Ardena responded rather irritably, while stirring the oatmeal for breakfast. "I should think you could learn to mend the holes in your stockings yourself. If you were a girl, you would be doing it. I don't see why I have to do everything that's done around this place."

"Maybe after this, instead of reading on Saturday night, you'd better attend to the mending," Mr. Marsh suggested in a pacifying tone of voice, as he put on his hat to go for an armful of wood. "Work before play, Ardena. But 'Kennilworth' is absorbing. I remember how I sat up nights to read it when I was a boy. What do you think you will read next? Try Thackeray — say 'The Newcomes.' Colonel Newcome is one of my favorite characters in fiction."

The next book that Ardena secured from the library was, therefore, "The Newcomes"—a big, bulky volume of fine print. Ardena intended to make a tremendous effort to read the book in a week.



In a little over two weeks she would finish three books. She hoped to do still better in the remaining half of the month.

By hurrying over the Saturday morning work Ardena found time to finish "The Newcomes" the following week. Down at the library she met Leta Lindsey again. Leta wanted "The Luck of Roaring Camp." Ardena selected "Pride and Prejudice."

"'Pride and Prejudice' is awfully slow reading," Leta whispered to Ardena, when they were back among the book-stacks. "It's a little volume but the print is fine. And 'The Mill on the Floss' is simply impossible. The name sounded sort of nice and so I took it. I thought I ought to read one of the big books, at least. But I had to give it up. And so I lost out on that. If I get the four read that I have to I'll do well. Mother's making some new Irish crochet and I'm crazy to learn. Dear, dear, isn't it just a bother trying to keep school work going when there are a hundred outside things you'd rather do!"

On the next Sunday William T. was half sick with a cold. Ardena, book in hand, (it was "Treasure Island") wound red flannel about his neck and covered him up on the lounge.



"Read to me, Dena," he coaxed. "Read me 'The Tar Baby.'"

"Sister can't stop and do it now. You be a good boy and go to sleep."

"I slept all night," answered William T. "Folks don't sleep in day time. When you going to finish reading books, Dena? When's grandma going to get well so she can come in and see me? When's Aunt Lib coming? When's Lillie going to get well? Where's Uncle Logan? Does Mrs. Shute know I'm sick on the lounge, Dena? Read me 'The Tar Baby,' please, Dena."

"Oh, William T., dear, do please be quiet so sister can read. "Here," handing him a small battered book, "you read your 'Peter Rabbit' aloud to me and we'll laugh at the funny places together."

On Monday Ardena brought home "Huckleberry Finn."

"Let's read it together," suggested Alonzo who was wiping the dishes with a long towel up in front of him. "Lenny Slocum's been reading it and he said he nearly died it was so funny. I liked 'Tom Sawyer' and I've been wanting to read 'Huck Finn.'"

"Goodness no, Alonzo," answered Ardena, splashing dishwater about her in her mad haste to be



through with the dishes. "Get father to read it with you some time. I've only got about a week left to do my reading in now. Guess I'll leave that frying-pan until morning. Or, here, I can stick it in the oven and use it again. I can't read so fast when I read aloud."

That evening, reading by the light from the sitting room lamp, Ardena glanced up suddenly from her book, recalled from floating with Jim and Huck down the Mississippi on the raft to her present surroundings. On the other side of the table, sewing a button on his vest, sat her father. But Ardena read on. About nine the wick in the kerosene lamp burned low and bright and then began to sputter.

"Well, well, well," said Mr. Marsh irritably, as he was mending up a rent in his coat, shoving a darning needle through the cloth in the most awkward of manners, "lamps are never filled any more. Maybe you'd better leave off with your reading for a little while and give more attention to the housework."

But Ardena, absorbed in her book, continued reading steadily on. "I'll try to fill all of the lamps tomorrow. Guess the kitchen lamp has a little left in it."

Mr. Marsh brought in the kitchen lamp. It was



empty. Without another word Mr. Marsh took up the two lamps and went out into the kitchen. He brought in the kerosene can from the shed, filled the lamp and came back to the sitting room. Ardena was bent over, reading by the light from the coals on the hearth. "Haven't been able to see through a lamp chimney for a month," he remarked in exasperation as he tried to thread the needle in the dim light that shone through the smoky chimney. "Come, come, Ardena, now this thing has got to stop for awhile."

"Yes," Ardena answered, turning another page. "My, but isn't 'Huck Finn' just the funniest book you ever did read! Carlton says I'll like 'The Pickwick Papers,' too. Oh, oh," holding her side with laughter, "but isn't it perfectly killing where Huck falls off the raft. Miss Miller says I'll like 'Innocents Abroad' and ought to read it now while I'm so interested in Mark Twain. Miss Miller thinks I'm making excellent progress with my reading."

The next morning when Ardena met Annabel Dilly in the cloakroom at school Annabel asked her how she was getting along with her reading.

"Six," Ardena replied.



"I'm just one ahead," Annabel answered. "Carlton and I are equal."

A couple of evenings later Ardena arrived home from the library with "Two Years before the Mast" under her arm. As she opened the door a cloud of dust greeted her. Alonzo, broom in hand, was sweeping the sitting room. No windows were open and nothing was covered up.

"For goodness' sake, Alonzo, what *are* you doing?" Ardena demanded in surprise. "What do you want to stir up all this dust for? Here, give the broom to me and I'll get this dust out of the way. I can't stop to do housework for a few days longer but I'll clean house at the end of the month. I *am* going to do that reading!"

But Alonzo kept steadily on, a frown on his face and his arms shoving the big broom back and forth with short, jerky, stubby movements. "You've been saying for a week that you'd clean up this room and you haven't done it. Lenny Slocum's coming over this evening and bring his new game he got for Christmas. His mother always keeps things clean and put away. She isn't all the time reading books, either. She can bake cookies as good as grandma's, too." Alonzo continued with the sweeping, jabbing



the broom around the legs of the stove in a manner truly threatening.

"Well, I can't help it," Ardena retorted quickly. "I've got to do this outside reading this month and you know it. I'm going to come out one of the first in the class, too. I like to please Miss Miller and I'm going to stick it out."

"Well, I'd like to do some reading myself," was Alonzo's equally quick retort, as he swept the dust on towards the kitchen door. "Lenny's got a new Trowbridge book, but I haven't had any time to read it. Lenny doesn't have to sweep floors and wipe dishes and mend his own stockings. Guess Mrs. Shute's been noticing how ragged we're getting 'cause she was just in and got the mending — great big armful. Where's that dustpan, anyway?"

On the home stretch Ardena hoped to hurry through "The Vicar of Wakefield." It took a lot of planning to get the reading done, but by omitting home lessons and reading on the way to and from school and keeping a book in front of her while doing the dishes she was making good progress. Ardena even came out a day ahead and on the very last evening she sat up until twelve to finish "The Man Without a Country."



On the last day of the month Ardena, really rather limp and weary, though seemingly satisfied, arrived home late from school. She opened the front door. What a fresh and clean smell! And what a clean and orderly sitting room! And, apparently giving the last touches, was William T., a big dustcloth in his hand which he was mopping around seemingly dustless furniture. Ardena went slowly on out to the kitchen. With her own big apron tied about his neck Alonzo stood at the kitchen sink washing dishes. At the kitchen table was Mr. Marsh. On top of a newspaper spread out on the table stood a row of lamps with tops off. Mr. Marsh was filling the lamps. Ardena stopped short. She said nothing. And nothing was said to Ardena. She went tiptoeing out into the middle of the large wet kitchen floor. And there on her hands and knees by the kitchen door was Mrs. Shute scrubbing the floor.

“Oh!” gasped Ardena. “Oh! Why — why — Mrs. Shute!”

Mrs. Shute sank back on her knees and looked at Ardena. There was really a twinkle in the eyes that were puckered into a frown. “I don’t like to seem to be interfering,” she explained. “But to be honest, I kept away ’bout as long as I could. Books



are nice and you ought to want to please your teachers. But a clean house is nice, too, according to my way of thinking."

Mrs. Shute moved her pail and commenced on a new section of the kitchen floor. Mr. Marsh continued filling lamps. Then he screwed on the tops. Alonzo was still splashing at the kitchen sink. Only William T., still making energetic flourishes with his dustcloth, made a further remark.

"We been very busy," he called out. "And we been very dirty, too. Mrs. Shute says we have."

Ardena continued to stand in the middle of the damp floor.

"Well, Ardena, how did you come out with your list of books?" her father finally questioned.

"Carlton and Annabel and I all read the same and led the class," she said after awhile, rather subdued in voice and manner. "Miss Miller said she was proud of us," rather slowly and thoughtfully. "But — well — well — I guess maybe housekeeping — good housekeeping — is nice. I think — maybe — I've read enough books to last — a long time." Then, her face brightening with a flash, she pulled off her cloak and cap with a jerk. "I know what I'm going to do. I'm going right straight to work and I'm going to cook a perfectly *de-li-cious*



feast. And Mrs. Shute is to stay and eat with us, too."

William T. was fast making his way to the kitchen. "Make us a nice drippy cake like Budge's mother makes, Dena, please do. We're very, very sick and tired of bread and butter meals."



## CHAPTER IX

### ARDENA A NURSE

Ardena dropped in at Mrs. Shute's one afternoon in February on her way home from school. Ardena was quite excited.

"Mrs. Shute," she began, as she sat down in the little rocker with the gay cretonne cushions that always stood by the side of the big, cheerful hardcoal burner, "what do you think is going to happen now? We're going to have a basket ball team in our high school. Miss Miller is organizing one. The boys have had one all year with Mr. Jackson as coach. I'm to be left guard on the first team. She called ten of the girls into her classroom to-day and told us about it. The girls have been wanting to organize one. Miss Miller played basket ball when she was in college."

Mrs. Shute was knitting — and it seemed to Ardena that the mitten looked very much like another small brown one. Ardena colored a little — she really did wish that they didn't have so much trouble



over home keeping track of William T.'s mittens. "Well, now, that's nice," she said, as she stooped to reach the ball of yarn that had rolled from her slickly starched white apron to the red and green carpet. "Girls need that sort of thing just as much as boys. I'm real glad you were asked, Ardena."

"We're to begin practice as soon as we get our suits. Miss Miller gave us our directions." Ardena drew a wadded bit of paper from her coat pocket and read it over. "We must each have a pair of gym shoes and a middy blouse and a pair of bloomers. Miss Miller said that we could get the shoes down at either shoe store for two dollars and the middy would be a dollar and the cloth for the bloomers should be very dark blue serge or flannel — she would prefer serge. She said to buy a pattern and to follow directions in making them."

"Well, well," Mrs. Shute's needles were clicking again, "I suppose you'll want them right away. I think maybe, Ardena, you'd better be a little careful in buying the cloth for the bloomers. You get your pattern and I'll get some samples of cloth when I go down to the bank to-morrow. And I think we can make one of those middy blouse things, too. You'd better let me go down and look at one of them in the store and then I can tell you what kind of cloth



to get and how much. As likely as not we can make one for thirty-five cents."

"All right," Ardena joyfully consented. "I've got three dollars that grandmother gave me for Christmas to buy something I really needed. Father will give me the rest. Only, of course, winter months are always hard-up months at our house. Do wish we ever could have a few real easy, lots-of-money months. Wonder what it would feel like." Ardena had grown quiet.

"Oh, well, Ardena, you'd better always remember the good old Quaker saying that you're thankful that things are as well with you as they are. If you want those things right away, you'd better drop in again after school to-morrow night and we'll talk over what we've found out. We can make the things evenings if you can come over to help me. How's your grandma? She doesn't seem to pick up very fast after her sick spell this winter, does she? I suppose your Aunt Lib is nearly worked to death. I've got a loaf of brown bread baked fresh this afternoon that'll taste good for your supper."

In due time the gym shoes were purchased, the bloomers and the blouse finished and Ardena was arriving home from school on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at six o'clock. Ardena talked forward



and guard and center and fouls and scores until the family felt satiated with the subject. Alonzo's interest in stories and accounts of baseball seemed to wane and even William T. planned springtime diversions other than football with Budge Cracker. Mr. Marsh was patiently quiet on the subject and endured. Mrs. Shute began again taking home the weekly ironing for the Marsh family. Black Lot-tie, down by the creek, had been coming for the family washing for some weeks.

"Father," Ardena announced at supper one evening, "we're getting ready for an open game. Our two teams are going to play together in the school gym some Friday night soon and we're going to spend the money we make for a new ball — an extra fine one. We're dead in earnest when we play now. Miss Miller is awfully strict and she calls a foul whenever she can. Yes, yes, yes, William T., Dena'll get you another glass of milk. Why don't you eat your bread and butter? You want water. Well, here it is. Don't be such a cross boy, honey."

The next evening Ardena arrived home early from school. She must do the ironing without fail. She built up the kitchen fire, pushed the irons to the front of the stove, put on her kitchen apron and went into the pantry for the basket of clothes. It was gone



again. Ardena, provoked, went straight out the back door and was on her way over to Mrs. Shute's back door when she saw Leta Lindsey coming in the front way. Ardena ran back. Leta had come over to talk with Ardena about the project on hand for getting Miss Miller a wonderful, big, beautiful bouquet and presenting it to her on the night of the basket-ball game.

"How perfectly fine!" exclaimed Ardena. "Of course I'll give a quarter. I'm glad you thought about it, Leta."

William T. was sidling in through the kitchen doorway.

"Goodness, but isn't William T.'s face red!" Leta remarked, as she was buttoning up her coat before going out the door. "Well, I'll tell Elise Hopkins what you say about roses. I think we'd better all get together and talk the thing over."

Ardena had gone out on the steps to see Leta off. William T. was still leaning poutingly against the door-casing, when Ardena came shivering inside, and was saying peevishly, "My face is not red, is it, Dena? My face is never red, is it, Dena?"

But Ardena was busy thinking about making a gingerbread for supper and Mrs. Shute was bringing back the basket of freshly ironed clothes and so



William T. went over to the lounge and lay down and nobody thought further of William T.

"I'm just ashamed of myself to let you do this ironing, Mrs. Shute, and I won't ever, ever let you do it again," Ardena was saying in mortified chagrin. "After this basket-ball game is over I'm going to settle down to housework and school work and I'm never, never going to do another thing but housework and school work until I'm through school."

The next morning and the next noon Ardena hurried a petulant William T. off to school. "I do wish you wouldn't be so cross," she pleaded with him.

"I'm not cross," he refuted in straight contradiction. "I'm never cross." Then tears came into William T.'s bright eyes and so Ardena kissed his red cheeks. "Aren't you well?" she inquired.

"'Course I am," William T. stoutly asserted.

"Well, you be a good boy, because I've got to practise basket ball this evening and can't be home early, but I'll take good care of you to-night."

Ardena ran home from school that night. It was five-thirty when she reached home. And in front of that slanting, bald looking, paint dimmed house that she thought she knew so very, very well she



stopped short and gasped in a big, breathless gasp of astonishment. SCARLET FEVER — in big black letters — on a glaring red card — tacked near the door of that house!

Ardena rushed pell-mell around the house to the back door. Out on the doorstep she was met by Mrs. Shute. Mrs. Shute was holding the door shut. "You mustn't go in, Ardena," she said. "It's William T. Doc Stubbs has just been here and he's asleep on the lounge now and I'm going to stay and take care of him. We think he's going to have a light case and will probably be in bed only a few days. He has a fever now and he's badly broken out. I heard him crying here at the back door and I ran on over. Alonzo hasn't come yet and we've sent for your father so we can make our arrangements."

Ardena continued to look steadily at Mrs. Shute without saying a word. So Mrs. Shute hurried on, "I've been making my plans real fast and I think I know how we'd better manage. If they hadn't quarantined this place I would have taken him on over to my house. But he's got to stay here now. So you and your father and Alonzo can get your things and go right on over to my house and live there. I'll stay here with William T. I'll think of



things of mine that I'll need from time to time, but I'll have to get them as I think about them. I'm real muddled, things coming as fast as they have."

"I'm going to take care of William T. myself." Ardena stood up straight and tall. "He's my baby — mother left him to me." Ardena put her hand on the kitchen door knob.

Mrs. Shute detained her with a gesture. "Now, Ardena, I know you're real impulsive, so don't go and do anything rash before we talk it over. I'm used to taking care of sick folks and I know how to manage."

"Doc Stubbs will show me," Ardena answered, her mouth drawn into a very straight line. "I took care of mother. Besides, this is my affair."

"But let's just talk it over, Ardena." Mrs. Shute was making every appeal she could think of and making them as fast as she could. "There's not one speck of use of your giving up your school work. You'll miss a month, too, and you have all you can do to keep the housework and your school work going when you are at it every day steady. And I've got time going to waste on my hands."

"I can study at home," calmly answered Ardena.

"You might catch it yourself. It's real contagious. Then just think how much trouble it will



make for all of us. I had it once when I was a girl, so I'm not afraid."

"Well," Ardena hesitated for a moment only, "it won't be any harder for me than for William T."

"But — but what are your father and Alonzo going to do?"

"Mrs. Shute," Ardena spoke with some decision, "this isn't a question of what *we* want to do; we must do what is best for William T."

"And there's your basket-ball game, too. We've got all of your things ready now; they're depending on you to play in that game and Miss Miller will be real disappointed if you don't do your part."

Ardena was quiet. Finally she said, and she said it slowly, "I'll be disappointed — and I've been disappointed so many times, too. And Miss Miller says that I'm a strong guard. But — but there are two substitutes. Letty Adams, with more practice, could take my place and do well. And she's anxious to get on the team and play in that game. But — but —"

William T. was crying — a faint, peevish cry. Ardena wrenched open the door.

"Ardena Marsh, you stay right there until your father gets here and tells us what's best to be done. I —"



But Ardena had the kitchen door open and was inside the house. "Dena, read Willy T. 'The Tar Baby,'" came in a fretful cry from the depths of the old carpet lounge by the fire in the sitting room. In a moment Ardena was kneeling beside him.

Ardena took care of William T., Mrs. Shute took care of Alonzo, and Mr. Marsh went down to stay with Doc Stubbs in his big, dreary, empty old house on Main Street. It was a long, long, slow, slow month for Ardena and William T. For the first few days William T. was rather a sick boy, but after a week he improved rapidly and was up and around the house in a couple of weeks. It was the long getting-well period that nearly drove Ardena to distraction. After school Alonzo always came over in front of the window and told them all of the school news. He also came daily to the back door and left something on the doorstep from Mrs. Shute. And Ardena began to notice, too, that Alonzo had a scrubbed and cleaned-up look that it had seemed impossible for him to acquire while under her care. His clothes were mended, patched, cleaned and pressed. And it seemed, too, that Alonzo began to take a pride in his appearance and to make an effort to be careful with his clothes. His hair was glossily brushed and his finger nails were trimmed and



cleaned. His shoes were kept well patched and polished. Ardena began to think Alonzo a very good-looking little brother, a brother to be proud of.

She tried to emulate the shining Alonzo in taking care of William T., and she even mended and cleaned and pressed his little suits and washed his hair when Doc Stubbs gave her permission and cleaned his finger nails and polished his little shoes. She invented games to be played while doing these things and made up stories to amuse him. She grew quite clever in fitting the story to the occasion and weaving in the moral so indirectly as to keep the wavering interest of the easily distracted listener.

Doc Stubbs, square and sandy and gruff, came in once a day and he always amused William T. with jokes and pictures and stories. Mrs. Shute began giving Mr. Marsh and Doc Stubbs their evening meal and Sunday dinner and Ardena watched them go and come. In a short time Ardena began to notice a difference in the appearance of the two men. Doc Stubbs, who had always been noticeably negligent as to his appearance, (he was a confirmed old bachelor and eschewed the society of women as much as possible) began to have a brushed and pressed appearance that at first made this old time, eccentric friend seem almost a stranger to her. Ardena tactfully



omitted any suggestions relating to the change and the doctor mentioned Mrs. Shute as little as possible. But Ardena knew that Mrs. Shute's kindness would meet with a big inward thanks. Doc was like a neglected boy and a little petting was showing good results. Also, with rather red-faced interest, Ardena saw that her father's old overcoat had been mended and pressed and that the buttons were all in place. Mr. Marsh also took on a well-groomed appearance. And on the board that they were getting over at Mrs. Shute's it seemed to Ardena that all three assumed a sleek and satisfied air that well became them.

One day when it was getting warmer and William T. was fast becoming a well boy she brought all of her clothes down from her room and she wheeled out the machine and oiled it and then set to work to tidy up her own wardrobe. She studied her lessons every day and she helped William T. with his. Notes came frequently from her school comrades and Annabel Dilly painstakingly kept her informed as to her lessons. Miss Miller wrote her notes frequently and said that she was proud of Ardena after all. They had postponed the game a couple of weeks so that Letty Adams could get in some practice. They missed Ardena, Miss Miller added, but



she felt that Ardena had done the right thing in thinking first of her little brother and the game (as they had arranged things) would not now be seriously handicapped. Letters came also from grandmother and Aunt Lib, and Uncle Logan came in twice a week with things from the farm for Ardena and William T. Grandmother was still very delicate and Aunt Lib was busy and the roads were melting and getting muddy and so Ardena knew that the kindnesses from these relatives meant many sacrifices in time and strength.

At times the house became unendurable to Ardena and she used to walk up and down the walk and around the house and then she felt better and came inside and decided to stick it out without saying one single word that would sound the least bit like complaining. But sometimes Ardena's spirit almost boiled up within her. The gym shoes and the middy blouse and the bloomers all hung in her closet. Oh, dear — dear — dear! Another long week of it and William T. perfectly well and getting so restless that she couldn't hold him inside the house any longer! Alonzo seemed to be immensely happy in his new home and went whistling down the street when he set out from Mrs. Shute's door. On Sun-



day Mrs. Shute and Alonzo and Mr. Marsh and Doc Stubbs went past the house on their way to church. They all waved at Ardena and William T. in the window, and Alonzo ran up to the door with a parcel. Alonzo had a new suit and Mr. Marsh and Doc Stubbs were in their very best and this very best was so conspicuously well cared for. Later, they all went back to the house and Ardena knew all about the good dinner they would be served and how dainty the serving would be, too. Ardena was about to weep with lonesomeness and weariness. But two big tears were already running down William T.'s fat cheeks and so she played another game of checkers with him.

On the last Friday of this long month was to occur the basket-ball game. Leta had written her a note about it and Annabel Dilly had sent her minute details concerning the coming event. Ardena went to bed early that night. And she wept big tears of disappointment. She got up late the next morning and when she came downstairs Alonzo was whistling for her. She went to the door and there stood Alonzo with a wonderful bouquet of American Beauty roses in his arms.

"Miss Miller sent you her flowers," he called out



joyously. "And Doc Stubbs says we don't have to be very careful 'cause the sign's coming down on Sunday."

Ardena clapped her hands together in wonder and delight. Yes, the flowers were the flowers that had been presented to Miss Miller on the night of the game. And she sent such a funny little note to Ardena along with the flowers.

"Got something else," Alonzo called out. He drew his hand from behind his back and held up a big store-wrapped package. "It's candy," he said. "I guessed it by the rattle. It's from Mr. Jackson. He brought the things over late last night, but your light was out so I waited until morning. I'm going to help Mrs. Shute clean out her cellar to-day. We've had a mighty good time over there. 'Course we're glad we're coming home. But, gee, Mrs. Shute can cook!"

And so Ardena spent the day housecleaning and baking and getting ready for the welcome old order of things.



## CHAPTER X

### VISITING GRANDMOTHER

It was the middle of the muggy month of March.

Seated in a kitchen chair in her blue calico apron one Saturday morning Ardena was reading aloud a note that had just come from Aunt Lib. When Ardena finished the note her eyes were quite misty, Alonzo was frowning a very deep frown and William T. was saying, "But what makes my grandma sick, I'd like to know."

The note had said that grandmother was getting no better, her cough was still bad and she didn't seem to be regaining her strength. Aunt Lib had said further that grandmother was so blue and discouraged, and so homesick to see Ardena and Alonzo and William T. that Uncle Logan would be in for them just as soon as he could possibly get to town with a buggy.

Suddenly Ardena jumped to her feet and threw off her kitchen apron with a jerk. "I'm going out



to see grandmother if I have to walk," she announced.

"And so am I," instantly repeated Alonzo.

"I am, too," echoed William T.

Now it was very raw and wintry and blustery and gloomy this Saturday morning in March when the Marsh children thus expressed themselves. And it was muddy — that thick, deep, lumpy mud that made the unpaved roads about Arcadia the most impassable roads one can well imagine.

"I haven't seen grandmother since last fall," said Ardena.

"We couldn't go out there for Christmas," Alonzo recollected.

"And then I had the scarlet fever," put in William T.

"Well, then, we'll go," definitely decided Ardena. "Uncle Logan can't get into town on account of the roads and we can't get out to see grandmother because Uncle Logan can't come in for us. Besides, grandmother needs us; she'd come to us mighty quick if she were well and we were sick. It's five miles down the track. But we can walk that all right. I wish I'd thought about going sooner and we could have asked father for the money and ridden up to Center Point on the five o'clock freight. But



then we would have been three miles away from the farm. Now we'll have about a mile to walk when we leave the track. I don't know whether we can make it or not, though," Ardena was really thinking aloud.

"Five miles isn't very long when you keep walking right along," Alonzo was eagerly explaining. "I've got my rubber boots. And I can help you and William T. over the muddiest places. We'll walk along the side of the road on the grass when we leave the track. Maybe it isn't as muddy in the country as it is here in town."

"Let's go and see grandmother," insisted William T. "I want to see my grandma the most of anybody in the world. I'll put on my rubbers. I haven't seen my grandmother for ever and ever and ever so long — months and months. I guess maybe it's about a whole year — or two whole years — or maybe —"

"She isn't getting any stronger, either," Ardena was saying, seemingly oblivious to William T.'s reckless reckoning of time. "And it will be another week anyway before Uncle Logan can get in with a team — and maybe two or three weeks. Father's gone over to Mapleton by this time and won't be back until night so I can't ask him. I don't believe



he would care if we went, if he knew how much grandmother really needed us."

"Then let's go, of course," urged Alonzo, "We've never stayed away from there so long in our lives before. I want to see grandma and Aunt Lib and all the children and —"

"And Shep," excitedly added William T. "Please, Dena, please let us go. I got my rubbers. I'm big now and I can walk miles and miles and miles and miles and never get the least little speck tired and —"

And so they started off.

It was a branch road that led out past grandmother's farm. And the track of this branch road was not in very good condition in the best of weather. For the first mile the Marsh children really enjoyed the adventure. They just tramped steadily on and had little to say, for they had about all they could do to attend to the walking, since stepping from tie to tie makes a long step and in between the ties it was soggy and in some places muddy. Occasionally they came across puddles of water that spread over the ties. Also, this was a March day and the raw wind blew and it blew and it blew. It fairly tore and pulled at their clothes and twisted and flapped and slapped their coats about



them and threatened every moment to snatch off their hats and send them spinning off across the fields beyond the barbed-wire fences. Alonzo could balance himself on the rail for a considerable stretch of time, but William T. was too unsteady for the rail and too short for the long steps from tie to tie and too slow to make very satisfactory progress. In the second mile of the journey William T. began to lag and in the third mile he became downright troublesome. Ardena began to wish that she had never attempted such a preposterous undertaking as this of getting William T. out to the farm. She wished that she had left William T. with Mrs. Shute.

In the third mile they came to a little bridge that spanned a small creek now choked with a wide stream of foaming water. They sat down on the rail to rest and William T. forgot his weariness in watching this rushing little stream. Off in the distance on the bare hilltops the big shadows cast by the sailing clouds went swinging on over the rolling prairie. But a big puff of white smoke and a shrill whistle cut short this pleasant little rest and they hurried down off the bridge. The road at the side of the track was low and muddy and William T. lost his rubber. Alonzo rescued it just as the big engine rounded the curve in the distance. Then all three



stood huddled together on a little knoll while the freight train with its ninety and nine cars (Alonzo counted them) was pulled clattering past them. Alonzo had become interested in the counting of the cars, but William T. clung to Ardena. "I didn't know miles were so long," he said, as he stolidly watched Alonzo wave a friendly hand at the trainmen. "Only half of me got rested."

"Miles aren't long," refuted Alonzo, as the train rumbled on off across the bridge and he made ready to carry William T. back to the track. "Besides, we want to see grandma. And you and Charlie'll have lots of fun playing with Shep. You can help Annie gather the eggs. You can't ever be a soldier like grandfather was and fight in the Civil War if you don't learn to walk without getting tired right away."

"I'm not tired right away," William T. stoically asserted, as he braced himself again. "I want to see grandma just as much as you do, too."

Ardena took hold of one of William T.'s hands and Alonzo the other and between them they pulled him on into the fourth mile. In the fifth and last mile Ardena carried him and then Alonzo carried him and then they steadied him on the rail and then they pulled him along again and then they carried



him on a seat made by their four hands and then they stopped and rested and began it all over again.

Finally, long past noon, hungry, footsore, weary and cold they reached the road that led away from the track and on a mile and more to the farm. And, oh, such a road! Ardena, looking at it, was heart-sick. The great black folds of mud looked to be a foot deep and the grass along the edges of the road seemed to offer no better footing, for the ground was low and level clear up to the fences. The road looked like one broad, black, wrinkled ribbon stretching on as far as the eye could see. Alonzo put his hands deep down in his pockets and gave a low whistle. William T. was too completely tired out to offer a suggestion. Ardena was about ready to weep.

"Well," said Alonzo finally, "I've got to manage this thing myself. I've got on rubber boots so I can make it. You and William T. will have to stay here while I go and get Uncle Logan to come back on horseback for you. Here," as he waded manfully off to the barbed-wire fence, "I'll try and fix you a seat so you can get rested a little." Alonzo squashed off to a small bank, climbed up it, rolled a couple of stray stones together, pulled a board loose from an old fence and made a seat. "Now," as



he waded back, "you come on, Ardena, and I'll carry William T., and you two sit here until I get back."

Of course, Alonzo, staggering up the bank with the heavy William T., dropped him squarely in the middle of the muddiest place. Ardena, now up the bank, lent a helping hand and succeeded in getting William T. again on his feet. His sorry plight now added the last straw to his burden of misery and he buried his sobs and his tears in Ardena's skirt. "Don't cry, William T.," Alonzo entreated. "Just think how glad grandma's going to be to see you. She's done a lot for you and you ought to be willing to do a little something for her. I'll go and get Uncle Logan to come and get you and you can ride back on old Nellie and we'll all be together again with grandma."

So William T. stopped crying and Ardena drew him close up to her on the improvised (and rather unsteady) seat and Alonzo set off. They watched him trudge off along the squashy roadside path, painfully pulling one heavy boot after the other until he was a speck in the distance.

Was there ever in all this world such a long and dreary two hours of waiting? It was chilly and William T. grew cold and hungry, and tired of sit-



ting still. She drew him close up to her to warm him, she talked to him about grandmother, she had him guess all the things that Aunt Lib would have for supper and then she had him looking clear off down the road for the first appearance of Uncle Logan. He grew tired again and he grew cold again and he grew hungry again. His references to the completely empty state of his stomach became annoyingly frequent. Ardena was worried, too. What if something should happen to Alonzo? What if they should have to spend the night in that lonely, dreary spot? Once Ardena gave William T. a sharp reproof for his many and varied complaints. Then William T. wept afresh and Ardena kissed him again and once more they looked 'way, 'way down the road for Uncle Logan.

Finally, Uncle Logan did come. Clear off in the distance they saw him, astride of the old white horse, Nellie, who was picking her way back and forth along the muddy road and lifting her feet high from the squashy puddles she plunged into. Ardena felt more like crying than laughing and William T. forgot his weariness and stood up and waved his hands and gave one glad hoot after the other. And behind the white horse was the old black horse, Billy. Uncle Logan waved his hand to them when he first



spied them. And when he came up close to them his plain, homely face was filled with a glad smile of welcome.

“Well, well, well,” he exclaimed, “so you came out afoot to see us! You wanted to see grandmother so badly that you couldn’t wait any longer. I was coming in for you just as soon as I could get in with a team. How glad we’ll all be to see you! And maybe you’ll cheer grandma up a bit. She’s been pretty blue lately. She doesn’t get very strong again and she’s not much like her old self. I think she’s been lonesome for you children, and it hurts her to think that she hasn’t been able to help you this winter. And Lib’s had her hands full with the housework and the children and mother. It’s been a pretty long, hard winter for us all. Yes, William T., you may sit up here and do my driving. That’s right, Ardena,” as he drew William T. up in front of him with Ardena’s help. “And now you can get on Billy’s back when I lead him up close to that little hill yonder.”

So the three went off down the muddy road to grandmother’s farm. William T. was too tired to be very loquacious and Ardena too relieved at being out of her predicament to be very talkative, either. It was a slow walk back the two miles, and evening



was coming on as they turned in at the farm and went down the lane to the back of the house.

Aunt Lib and the four children and Alonzo, moving slowly in Uncle Logan's big house slippers, came out to greet them. "I'm glad you came, Ardena," Aunt Lib said as she kissed her. "I think you were real foolish to set off afoot but grandmother's had such an extra blue spell to-day that I've been quite at my wit's end to keep her encouraged. She hasn't the strength to do much and so she gets discontented. She broke down and cried when poor Alonzo came into the kitchen completely tuckered out and said that you three wanted to see her so badly that you set off to walk here. She's been talking about you so much and she's been so lonely without you this winter that I thought I'd manage to get you out here some way if I could just get a minute to think. We've had a long, busy, anxious winter here and I'm glad to see spring coming. But come right on in and we'll get you warmed up and some clean, dry clothes on you and give you something to eat. I guess I'd better see to William T. myself. I don't want him to take cold."

When grandmother saw Ardena and William T. the tears ran down her cheeks and she put her apron over her eyes. Then Uncle Logan began making



some funny remarks and Aunt Lib began giving Ardena directions about cleaning herself up and helping her with the supper.

They had an extra good Saturday night supper in the big, warm cheerful kitchen. In the evening they sat for a little while about the stove in the sitting room, William T. asleep in grandmother's arms and Ardena on one side of her chair and Alonzo on the other. Uncle Logan had telephoned in to tell Mr. Marsh, when he returned, that the children were safe at the farm and that they would stay until Monday morning when he would take them by horseback over to the station at Center Point, the little town some three miles beyond.

Sunday dawned warm and springlike. Aunt Lib prepared a delicious chicken dinner and Ardena set the table in the sitting room with the very best china and linen. Grandmother sat in her rocking chair in the bay window and William T. and Alonzo hovered near her, telling her all the things that had happened to them during the winter and about their school work, and running errands for her and bringing their playthings near her when they played with the other children. William T. and Alonzo each had on a new waist that grandmother had made for them during the winter and Ardena wore a new



black and white calico apron edged with a red scalloped braid.

In the afternoon Aunt Lib whispered to Ardena that grandmother seemed to be getting tired and Ardena had better help her upstairs to her room so that she could take her afternoon nap as usual. When up in the pleasant, old-fashioned south room that belonged to grandmother the two sat down for a few moments in the sun-flooded front windows.

"I've been doing more for you this winter than I've let you know," grandmother was saying. "When William T. was sick with the scarlet fever and I couldn't get in to you I thought about you day and night and the way I could best ease my mind was by working for you out here. Go in my closet there and bring me out that new comfort and quilt on the shelf. The quilt's one that your mother started when she was a little girl and never finished and the comfort's made from pieces from her things. I've been wanting to make these things for you to keep for your very own, and since I've not been of much account with the housework this winter I got busy on this work."

Then before Ardena had finally succeeded in persuading grandmother to lie down for her much needed rest they had talked of old times and grand-



mother had brought out a number of things that had belonged to her mother — some little old-fashioned photographs of her when a child and a cameo brooch and a plain band ring.

“You might as well have them now,” grandmother had said. “You’re getting old enough to know their value and to take care of them as well as I could. You’re — you’re getting more like your mother. She was tall — and — and she was quick and — capable — and good. Now you’re settling down a little more steady and getting over your harum-scarum ways, I think — you’ll be — like your mother.”

Later, in the Sunday twilight, they sat around the glowing fire in the sitting room and grandmother told them stories about when she was a little girl in the early days on the farm and about the little New England towns where her mother and father grew up and about the home over in England where her mother’s mother and father had come from.

In getting ready for bed that night Aunt Lib whispered to Ardena, “I can’t tell you how glad I am that you’ve been here to-day. You three children have made grandmother so happy. We’re going to manage — somehow — to have you out here every Sunday — for a while.”



## CHAPTER XI

### LETA ENTERTAINS

In May Leta entertained the sophomore class. And the guest of honor was Miss Miller.

"I want to do something for Miss Miller," Leta told Ardena on the way home from school. "I do so adore her. And she is so fond of our class. Mother said that I should invite one of the gentlemen teachers for Miss Miller and so I invited Mr. Jackson. They've been going together all this year, you know."

"Oh, yes," Ardena quickly explained. "Of course everybody loves Miss Miller. And she is so lovely to everybody that of course she is nice to Mr. Jackson and he likes her as well as all of us do."

"Well, do you know," Leta further continued, "that Carlton says that Mr. Jackson is fine when you come to know him? The boys have been getting mighty fond of him and have been taking him off with them on their walking hikes and to campfires and a lot of other affairs. And Adelbert says



that he's a better old scout than you'd think for. He had to work all of his way through college and so he just had to be a dig. And he really doesn't mean it when he scowls — his eyes are weak from studying too late nights. The boys say, too, that he's read everything you can think of and he's got first class ideas and the boys have a lot of respect for his opinions. I think he's much nicer looking since he parts his hair on the side and it doesn't bristle up so stiff from his forehead."

"Oh, I know he's real smart — and real gentlemanly — and real kind, too. He's done a lot of thoughtful things for us, and Alonzo and William T. are ever so fond of him. And yet you know that Miss Miller is so perfectly adorable that there isn't a man anywhere that is really her equal. Of course she is kind to Mr. Jackson, as kind as she always is to everybody. From the way Miss Miller treats a person you can't tell whether he's her best friend or worst enemy. I've really been trying my very hardest to be like Miss Miller this year. And next year I think I can be more like her still. I only do wish my hair was that glossy brown instead of this abominable red. I'm growing tall like Miss Miller and I'm trying to speak in that quiet voice which she does and even when I'm calling William T. in a hurry



I'm getting so that I can remember not to shriek out in the awful shrill scream father abhors."

"Well, she truly is adorable. I only hope that she stays in the high school until I'm through."

"Of course she will," answered Ardena. "She is so well liked she won't lose her position. I suppose some time she'll find a perfectly handsome man, a regular Prince Charming with light wavy hair and blue eyes and very graceful manners, and then she'll get married. But I feel sure that we'll have her as long as we need her. Why, I couldn't think of studying English with anyone else. It's so nice of your mother to let you entertain our class and Miss Miller! I can't wait until the night. Miss Miller had the boys draw lots for the girls. Wonder who I'll get."

The appearance that Ardena was to make on the night of the party was causing her considerable concern. And so the next evening she went over to Mrs. Shute's house to talk to her about the material she was to purchase for her new dress. A light was burning in Mrs. Shute's parlor and this fact rather surprised Ardena. But absorbed in the question of the prettiest material for this new dress Ardena went on up the walk and tapped on the front door. Ardena had come around the front way rather than the



back since the back way at night was rather dark and uncertain. Ardena tapped on the front door and then opened the door slightly and called to Mrs. Shute. But she stopped short midway between the "Mrs." and the "Shute." Sitting in that front parlor was Doc Stubbs.

"Oh, Mrs. Shute," Ardena questioned quickly, "you aren't sick, are you?"

Mrs. Shute, dressed up in her gray silk with a white tie at her throat, blushed a girlish crimson blush, a blush as crimson as the bouquet of red roses in the green vase on the stand at her side.

"Come right on in, Ardena," Mrs. Shute called hospitably. "What've you got there — some samples for your new dress? I'm real glad you brought them over, because I've been thinking we'd better get to work on that dress before long. You want to look real pretty when you go over to the Lindseys'. Mrs. Lindsey's quite dressy herself and she's always kept Leta dressed right up in the latest style. Now this here Persian lawn," holding the sample up to the light, "seems like a fine, firm piece. What did you say the price was?"

And so Ardena soon felt right at home, despite the fact of the presence of Doc Stubbs in Mrs. Shute's parlor on other than a professional visit.



Meanwhile the doctor, stubby and red-faced and nervous, clothed now in a newly pressed suit and uncomfortable in a high collar, just frowned and squirmed and crossed one leg over the other. Ardena stayed until nine o'clock.

"Doc Stubbs was over there," she remarked casually to her father when she returned. "How funny!"

Mr. Marsh glanced up from his magazine. "Why, funny?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well, I suppose that Mrs. Shute was so nice to him when William T. had the scarlet fever and she boarded and took care of all of you that he likes to go there now. But I never saw Doc just sit still and visit with a person before. He looks a little better since he takes more pains with his appearance. Mrs. Shute likes this piece, father. And you said that I could have the patent leather pumps, didn't you? My, aren't we glad you got that Mapleton contract, though! This summer we're going to fix up the house, aren't we, father? Isn't it nice to have a sort of plenty feeling?"

Ardena helped with the making of the dress as much as she could, sewing the lace and insertion on by hand, for the lace and insertion were narrow and inexpensive and Mrs. Shute said that sewing them



on by hand would show off the lace to better advantage. One very warm evening a few days later Ardena was up in her bedroom sewing away in the somewhat dim light that came through the somewhat dim chimney. Alonzo and William T. were asleep in the next room and she could hear their regular breathing. Outside the open window was the cool and quiet darkness.

Ardena grew sleepy, yawning long, deep yawns. Her eyes were tired. It must be ten o'clock. She wondered why her father didn't come home from the office. Maybe he had come in and was reading down by the sitting room light. She finally folded up her work, put it on the bureau, handy for the next extra moment she could find, and went downstairs. It was dark. She went to the door and out on the porch, looking down the street for her father. There was a light burning in Mrs. Shute's sitting room to the side of the house. Also there were voices on the front porch. Who could be calling on Mrs. Shute this late in the evening? Nine o'clock was bedtime for most of the neighborhood. Ardena turned back, lighted the lamp and began to straighten up the sitting room table, piling up books and papers and magazines. Presently her father came in.



"Oh," she said, a little startled, "I didn't hear you coming down the street! Who do you suppose has been calling on Mrs. Shute this late in the evening? I'm afraid that Mrs. Shute is cultivating late habits. Maybe it was old John Brown come over to see about some carpenter work she wants done. Is the back door locked, father?"

"I'll see," immediately responded Mr. Marsh. "By the way, Ardena," he called from the kitchen, "I've about made up my mind to get that new spring suit we were looking at Saturday. Work's coming in pretty steady now and I'm getting a little ahead."

"To be sure," at once responded Ardena. "You've worn your old shiny suit so long that it's threadbare. Take your best suit for every day and get this new one for best. If we're prosperous, let's look the part," laughed Ardena.

Her father, coming back into the sitting room, was smiling his quiet, whimsical smile.

"You're a dandy, dear old father, anyway," Ardena assured him as she gave him a big good-night kiss. "It's your turn, without a doubt."

Ardena looked pretty on the night of the party. It was a simple dress, for while Mrs. Shute was a very neat seamstress she was not particularly artistic in her designs. It was made plenty large, too, to



allow for shrinkage and growth, and the white ribbon sash was tied in loose folds so as not to crush the ribbon any more than was necessary. But white was exceedingly becoming to Ardena with her red hair fluffed out about her face. And she wore her new patent leather pumps with buckles. Also, Ardena was intensely happy; and happiness was Ardena's chief charm.

Adelbert Hastings came for Ardena. Since there was a larger number of girls in the class than boys Adelbert brought Annabel Dilly along with him. Annabel wore a tight little dress that was rather old style. But Annabel's wonderful two long braids of hair made Annabel attractive. Then, also, Annabel was so perfectly sweet and unselfish that everybody learned to like Annabel even if the liking was not spontaneous.

It was a very formal party. The guests were ushered into the house by a little pink and white girl and they were directed to the upstairs room by another little pink and white girl. Downstairs was the receiving line and in the receiving line were Leta in soft pink silk and Mrs. Lindsey in white and Miss Miller in palest blue. Ardena felt ill at ease. She grew quiet and shy. Her own classmates did not look familiar to her. Even the teachers seemed out



of their element and Ardena could not be natural with them. There were some friends of the Lindseys there whom Ardena knew only by name. Annabel fitted into these new surroundings with more ease than Ardena, and Adelbert was perfectly at home. Watching the easy and natural Adelbert, Ardena's shyness began to leave her somewhat. Also Annabel made a number of tactful little manoeuvres to draw Ardena out of herself. But when Miss Miller finally came across the room to her and put her arm about her and Mr. Jackson shook hands warmly with her and made some conventional but kindly joke Ardena began to respond with her usual quickness of wit.

Out in the dining room there were a half-dozen larger pink and white girls who served the daintiest of pink and white cakes and ice cream. The room was filled with bowls of pink and white roses and the room was full of their fragrance. Again Ardena felt shy and awkward. But then, she noted as she looked about, so did most of her classmates look shy and embarrassed. Through the doorway she caught a glimpse of Miss Miller. And Miss Miller was just as kind and thoughtful and natural as she always was. As usual, too, she was particularly kind to the attentive Mr. Jackson at her



side. Ardena decided to try the same tactics and began to be particularly gracious and attentive to Henry Loring, a big and awkward boy from the country, who was sitting beside her. Then Ardena began, for the first time during the evening, to have a really good time. When Henry forgot his awkwardness he became interesting and amusing company.

During the evening there was music and readings by way of entertainment. But the formality of the occasion did not wear off and Ardena was really relieved when they had safely made their farewells and were homeward bound. It was a bright, warm moonlight night and the three wandered slowly on toward Ardena's home.

"Did you know that Miss Miller wasn't expecting to return next fall?" asked Annabel.

"I had surmised it," laughed Adelbert.

Ardena was merely gasping with astonishment.

"And Mr. Jackson isn't either, of course," further communicated Annabel.

Ardena wasn't paying much attention to the latter remark.

"I'm not knocked off my feet at the news," Adelbert answered lightly.

"Miss Miller says that she intends staying at



home for awhile. She needs the rest and her parents need her. And Mr. Jackson is going east for further study," continued Annabel.

Adelbert laughed outright. "That will do to tell," he replied. "But for my part I just put two and two together."

"Well," deliberated Annabel, "I suppose that I really ought not to be very much surprised. But, somehow, I always thought of them as merely good friends. How we will miss dear, sweet Miss Miller! I can't bear to think of next year without her."

"We fellows are going to miss Mr. Jackson, too. He's a mighty likable fellow when you come to know him and I've a lot of admiration for him. The longer we know him, the better we like him. We fellows are planning some sort of outdoor stunt as a send-off to him. By the way, this affair was in the nature of a farewell to Miss Miller, although the Lindseys didn't put it in that way because she wants her future plans kept quiet until after she has left town."

Ardena was not saying a word. She was too amazed at the news to be able to gather her thoughts together. She could just manage to say good-by and mention something about having spent a pleasant evening. She ran up the steps that led to the



front door. There was a light inside and her father was reading by the light.

Ardena sat down on the bumpy carpet lounge, not even being mindful not to crumple the stiff sash of this very new dress.

"Did you have a nice time?" questioned her father, glancing up at her over his big spectacles.

Ardena sank her bushy head into her hands. "Oh, oh, oh," she wailed, "I think that I have the very worst luck that anybody ever, ever had! First mother left us. And then grandmother left us. Now Uncle Logan and Aunt Lib are going to sell the farm and move out to Dakota. And — and now the very last thing of all — Miss Miller's going away — and not coming back. Oh, oh, oh," she sobbed, "I feel a-bandoned — and — and I don't know what I'll do! If — if Mrs. Shute goes — goes back on us — now — we're just done for!"

A very tearful Ardena mounted the steep flight of narrow stairs that night to her bedroom. When she got up in her room she sat down by the window in the moonlight and wept again. The new dress and the new handkerchief were quite crumpled. The stiff sash was quite wilted. The new shoes hurt her feet and she pulled them impatiently off. Ardena looked off out the window. An automobile



was coming down the street at a slow glide. It was Doc Stubbs's new automobile, too. And sitting in the automobile with Doc Stubbs was — yes, she could see them very plainly now — Mrs. Shute. With a great big gulp Ardena wept afresh.



## CHAPTER XII

### A WELCOME STEPMOTHER

The school year was over. William T. brought home his books piled on top of the slate that was bound with frayed red felt and Alonzo brought home his piled on top of his geography and Ardena brought home hers in a stack under each arm. William T. took off his shoes and stockings and donned overalls and was ready for a long summer of play with Budge Cracker of across the street. Alonzo reluctantly departed for the garden with the hoe over his shoulder, and Ardena put on her big calico apron and began on the stacked up dishes, an accumulation left from breakfast and lunch.

That evening Mr. Marsh, in his customarily quiet and reticent manner, took his place at the head of the table. But it seemed to Ardena that he was even a little more silent and reserved than was his custom.

“Are we going to have some repairs done on the



house this summer and the yard fixed up, father?" she inquired, as she poured the water.

"I'll commence soon now," he answered quietly.

"Doc Stubbs is having lots of work done on his house, isn't he? It will be one of the finest looking places on Main Street when it is finished."

"I think it will be a very attractive place. I haven't seen the doctor lately to talk with him about it."

The four ate in silence for awhile. Then Ardena ventured again, "Uncle Logan's definitely decided to take that land out in Dakota, hasn't he? I don't want grandmother's farm sold. I don't want them to move away."

"But Logan thinks that he can do better up there. After the mortgage on the farm is paid off and you children get your mother's share there won't be a great deal left to buy Iowa farmland with. But he can go up to that new country and get more land for a small amount invested. Your money must educate you children and give you a start in life. Yes, William T.," to the small boy sliding down from his chair, "you are excused. Only I do wish that you would take the time to eat your supper properly. You will have all summer to play in."

Long hot days of housework commenced again



for Ardena. Aunt Lib and Uncle Logan were rushed to death with the farm work, Mrs. Shute seemed busy and preoccupied with her own affairs, Doc Stubbs was interested in the re-modelling of his house and Mr. Marsh was extra busy at the printing office. With Alonzo helping the most of the day at the office and William T. spending the most of the day over at Budge Cracker's, Ardena was left almost entirely alone and she found that she had long, long hours for thinking over a number of very puzzling things.

One evening the three children were sitting out on the back doorstep. It was a warm August evening and they were glad to rest awhile out in the cool breeze before going in the house to bed.

"It's too dreadfully hot to dress up," Ardena said, as she brushed the damp hair back from her forehead with a wadded handkerchief. "Ironing and jelly-making make a pretty hard day's work, I think."

"Yes, I think so too," sympathetically assented William T.

But Ardena was not listening to William T. and Alonzo was busy trying to catch an elusive firefly.

"Seems as if we were sort of left all to our-



selves," she said, finally giving utterance to the thoughts running through her mind.

Alonzo sat down on the doorstep. "You bet it does, Ardena. We're left alone the most of the time. When Aunt Lib and Uncle Logan go away next spring we'll be left all by ourselves."

An automobile came whirring past and drew up at Mrs. Shute's house.

They didn't say a word for a long time. Then Ardena remarked, "I'm not going to be fooled again as I was with Miss Miller. Mrs. Shute will leave us next."

"And Doc isn't half as nice as father is," was the statement that came from Alonzo. Ardena was rather surprised that Alonzo had arrived unaided at exactly her own conclusions in the matter. "He's building a fine house down there on Main Street. But I'll take dad any day."

"Doc Stubbs never takes me riding any more," William T. put in between big yawns.

Very soon the automobile whirled back past the house. There was only one occupant of the car.

"Wish dad would go and tell Mrs. Shute she had to come and live with us," said Alonzo. "Let's ask him to."



Just then at that identical moment who should come around the corner of the house but Mrs. Shute. "I've been looking for you children," she said, as she sat down on the step beside them. She put her arm around William T. and drew him close up to her. Then Alonzo, slowly but surely, began edging his way closer up to Mrs. Shute as she sat on the step. "Your father's been gone so many nights now and you children are left so much alone."

"We — we been wishing," began William T. (Ardena tried to stop him with a nudge but the nudge proved to be totally ineffectual) "that — that you would come and live at our house and you would be our mother. Budge has got a mother. I'd like a mother, too. Mothers are nice."

Alonzo and Ardena were speechless with amazement and chagrin. The tree-toads and the katydids seemed to shriek out in the absolute quiet of the darkness about them. Ardena was about to say something — anything. But Mrs. Shute was speaking.

"William T., dear," she was saying with an embarrassed little laugh, "I — I don't think I'm half good enough to be a mother to such a fine boy as you are — and such nice children as Alonzo and Ardena. I — I think — probably — your father had



better look a little longer." Then, after another little embarrassed laugh while her arm on William T.'s shoulder tightened its hold, "You see, William T., your invitation comes rather suddenly. I think that I'll have to think it over."

William T. jumped up and threw his arms about her neck. "I'm going to ask my father to ask you, too," he generously offered.

They talked of other things then — the moon and the stars, and the why and the how of such wonderful big mysterious things. William T. fell sound asleep with his head in Mrs. Shute's lap and had to be helped upstairs to bed. And so it was Ardena who stayed up and waited for her father.

He seemed very tired when he came in. He took off his coat and shoes and put on his old slippers and picked up a magazine for a minute. With a little sinking of the heart Ardena noticed for the first time how old and worn he seemed to be growing.

"Father," she finally asked timidly, but nevertheless bluntly and resolutely, "why — why can't Mrs. Shute come and live with us and be our mother? We all love her so much."

Mr. Marsh looked up at his daughter with a very odd smile. "Because, my dear," he said, "of professional ethics. Doc is first on the ground. Then,



also," a little more soberly, "Doc has much more to offer Mrs. Shute than I have in the way of money and position. Besides," again reading the magazine, "to use a slang expression, I should scarcely call it honorable to butt in. I have the greatest of admiration and respect for Mrs. Shute. And — she has been infinitely kind to my children. But so is Doc a lifelong and much-tried and found-true friend. I am wondering, Ardena," again glancing up, "how it would do for me to hunt around for a housekeeper for next year. I am getting ahead now in the business. Then, also, you are shouldering too big a load for a young girl in the high school. And after Lib goes you will be left so much alone. The only people I can think of I could get here in Arcadia are Old Aunt Rachel and Black Lottie. Old Aunt Rachel is old and crippled up with rheumatism, but she is a kindly old soul and would help out if she came here to live with us. If I took Black Lottie, I would have her come in by the day. She is big and strong and an excellent cook and housekeeper. I have talked the plan over with Aunt Lib and Mrs. Shute. Which —"

But Ardena's eyes were filled full of big tears. So Mr. Marsh changed the subject and they soon went to bed.



By the next morning William T. had forgotten his promise of the evening before and departed immediately after breakfast for the front yard and a band of neighborhood children.

So all day long Ardena worked about the house. And she thought of rheumatic, doddering Old Aunt Rachel and she thought of big, noisy Black Lottie. The next evening the three children sat out on the back doorstep again. And Ardena, full to overflowing with this one absorbing worry, communicated the news to Alonzo and William T.

"Old Aunt Rachel! Black Lottie!" Alonzo's tone was bursting with disgust. "I should think — oh, well, I guess after all poor father is doing the best for us he can!"

"But why isn't Mrs. Shute going to come and be our mother?" questioned William T.

"Because," Ardena answered him briefly.

"Because why not?" still persisted William T.

"Well, just because," Ardena emphasized.

"Then," said William T., snuggling up close to his sister, "Lonzy and I'll be Dena's."

Ardena hugged him close up to her. "If we can't have Mrs. Shute, then we'll stay by ourselves, won't we, Dena's Willy T.?"

And who should come around the corner of the



house again at this very identical moment but Mrs. Shute! And William T. hugged her close again and Alonzo crept slowly up to her and Ardena on the step below leaned her head on her knee. They did not talk much; they drew close together and were busy with their own thoughts.

And pretty soon a familiar step sounded in the house and some one was coming through the kitchen and was standing by the screen door. Then Mr. Marsh came out and sat down on the steps beside them.

"Father!" exclaimed William T. (Ardena was not trying to restrain him at all), "I been meaning to tell you. Mrs. Shute said last night that — that — that she'd come and be our mother only — only we never asked her to come. We don't want Old Aunt Rachel. We don't want Black Lottie. We like Mrs. Shute a hundred million times the best."

"But — well —," Mr. Marsh laughed an embarrassed little laugh and drew his small son up to him, "how — how about that new house down on Main Street?"

"The doctor's nephew died a few weeks ago out in California and left a wife with an old mother and two little girls to support. She appealed to the doctor for a little help until she could get started in



something. When he told me about it, I told him just exactly what I thought it was his duty to do. I've insisted that he send straight out to California for that family and that he bring them here and take care of them all and I told him he'd be more than repaid in the happiness he'd get out of it." Mrs. Shute was quite dignified and decided in her manner.

"But — but how about Doc?"

Then Ardena laughingly put in, "But 'why don't you speak for yourself, John'?"

And so it came about that Mrs. Shute's little cottage was enlarged and remodelled and, you may be sure, aired and cleaned and scrubbed to a perfectly satisfactory state. Out of due respect for the late Ebenezer the wedding was put off until Thanksgiving. But, oh, what a Thanksgiving day it was! for Mrs. Shute and Mr. Marsh and all three of the Marsh children and Aunt Lib and Uncle Logan and all of their four children and Doc Stubbs and his nephew's niece and her mother and her two children and the Reverend Mr. Bell and Mrs. Bell and Carlton Bell all came to this Thanksgiving feast.

"It's the thankfulest Thanksgiving of them all," was William T.'s summary of the day.

THE END



















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